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THE MAGAZINE

Fantasy AND Science Fiction

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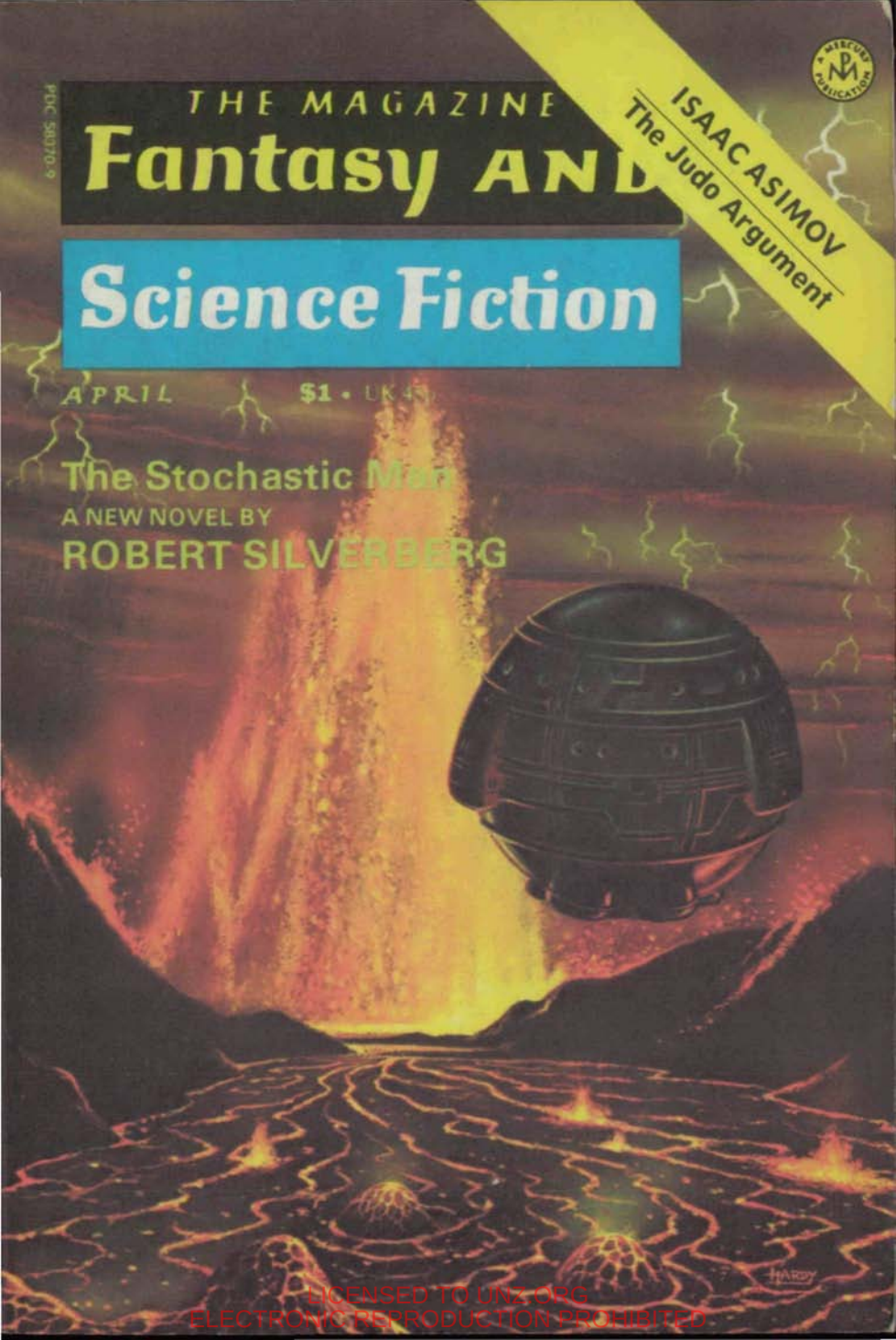
ISAAC ASIMOV
The Judo Argument

The Stochastic Man
A NEW NOVEL BY
ROBERT SILVERBERG



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w novel, like much of Robert Silverberg's recent work, ith one of the classic themes of science fiction, in this recognition. That it treats the theme with uncommon range)th is also typical of Silverberg's work. Here, then, is a)out two men who can see the future and how this ne gift affects them and those around them in a the-century New York City.

The Stochastic Man

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

remarkable that a science gan with the consideration of f chance should have become t important object of human ge .... The most important is of life are, for the most part, ily problems of probability.
aplace: *Theorie Analytique des abilities*

a man learns to *see* he finds alone in the world with nothing
Castaneda: *A Separate Reality*

1.

are born by accident into a random universe. Our lives termined by entirely fortui- combinations of genes. er happens happens by . The concepts of cause and re fallacies. There are only g causes leading to *apparent* effects. Since nothing truly follows from anything else, we swim each day through seas of chaos, and nothing is predictable, not even the events of the very next instant.

Do you believe that?

If you do, I pity you, because yours must be a bleak and terrifying and comfortless life.

I think I once believed something very much like that, when I was about seventeen and the world seemed hostile and incomprehensible. I think I once believed that the universe is a gigantic dice game, without purpose or pattern, into which we foolish mortals interpose the comforting notion of causality for the sake of supporting our precarious, fragile sanity. I think I once felt that in this random,

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Fantasy and Scienc

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APRIL • 26th YEAR OF PUBLICATI

NOVEL

THE STOCHASTIC MAN (1st of 3 parts) **ROBERT**

NOVELET

25 CRUNCH SPLIT RIGHT ON TWO **GEO. AL**

SHORT STORIES

WHITE WOLF CALLING
THE MILEWIDE STEAMROLLER **RAY**
DECAY
POP GOES THE WEASEL **ROBE**
PLEASE CLOSE THE GATE ON ACCOUNT OF THE KITTEN **DORIS P**

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LETTERS

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capricious cosmos we're lucky to survive from hour to hour, let alone from year to year, because at any moment, without warning or reason, the sun might go nova or the world turn into a great blob of petroleum jelly. Faith and good works are insufficient, indeed irrelevant; anything might befall anyone at any time; therefore live for the moment and take no heed of tomorrow, for it takes no heed of you.

A cynical philosophy, and adolescent, too. Adolescent cynicism is mainly a defense against fear. As I grew older, I suppose I found the world less frightening, and I became less cynical. I regained some of the innocence of childhood and accepted, as any child accepts, the concept of causality. Push the baby and the baby falls down. Cause and effect. Kick the football hard and it sails through the air. Cause and effect, cause and effect. The universe, I conceded, may be without purpose, but certainly not without pattern. Thus I took my first steps on the road that led me to my career and thence into politics and from there to the teachings of the all-seeing Martin Carvajal, that dark and tortured man who now rests in the peace he dreaded. It was Carvajal who brought me to the place in space and time I occupy on this day.

2.

My name is Lew Nichols. I have light sandy hair, dark eyes, no significant identifying scars, and I stand exactly two meters tall. I was married — two-group — to Sundara Shastri. We had no children and now we are separated, no decree. My current age is not quite 35 years. I was born in New York City on 1 January 1966 at 0216 hours. Earlier that evening two simultaneous events of historic magnitude were recorded in New York: the inauguration of the glamorous and famous Mayor John Lindsay and the onset of the great, catastrophic first New York subway strike. Do you believe in simultaneity? I do. There's no stochasticity without simultaneity, and no sanity either. If we try to see the universe as an aggregation of unrelated happenings, a sparkling pointillist canvas of non-causality, we're lost.

My mother was due to deliver in mid-January, but I arrived two weeks ahead of time, most inconveniently for my parents, who had to get to the hospital in the small hours of New Year's Eve in a city suddenly deprived of public transport. If their predictive techniques had been keener, they might have thought of renting a car that evening. If Mayor Lindsay had been using better predictive

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techniques, I suppose the poor bastard would have resigned at his own swearing-in and saved himself years of headaches.

3.

Causality is a decent, honorable principle, but it doesn't have all the answers. If we want to make sense of things, we have to move on beyond it. We have to recognize that many important phenomena refuse to be packed into neat causal packages but can be interpreted only by stochastic methods.

A system in which events occur according to a law of probability but aren't individually determined in accordance with the principle of causality is a stochastic system. The daily rising of the sun isn't a stochastic event: it's inflexibly and invariably determined by the relative positions of the earth and the sun in the heavens, and once we understand the causal mechanism, there's no risk in predicting that the sun will rise tomorrow and the next day and the next. We can even predict the exact time of sunrise, and we don't *guess* it, we *know it in advance.* The tendency of water to flow downhill isn't a stochastic event either: it's a function of gravitational attraction, which we hold to be a constant. But there are many areas where causality fails us and stochasticity must come to our rescue.

For instance, we're unable to predict the movements of any one molecule in a liter of oxygen, but with some understanding of kinetic theory we can confidently anticipate the behavior of the whole liter. We have no way of foretelling when a particular uranium atom will undergo radioactive decay, but we can calculate quite accurately how many atoms in a block of U-235 will disintegrate in the next ten thousand years. We don't know what the next spin of the roulette wheel will bring, but the house has a good idea of what its take is likely to be over the course of a long evening. All sorts of processes, however unpredictable they may seem on a minute-by-minute or case-by-case basis, are predictable by stochastic techniques.

Stochastic. According to the Oxford English Dictionary this word was coined in 1662 and is now *rare* or *obs.* Don't believe it. It's the OED that's *obs.*, not *stochastic,* which gets less *obs.* every day. The word is from the Greek, originally meaning "target" or "point of aim," from which the Greeks derived a word meaning "to aim at a mark," and, by metaphorical extension, "to reflect, to think." It came into English first as a fancy way of saying "pertaining to guesswork," as in Whitefoot's

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remark about Sir Thomas Browne in 1712: "Tho' he were no prophet ... yet in that faculty which comes nearest it, he excelled, i.e., the stochastick, wherein he was seldom mistaken, as to future events."

In the immortal words of Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688), "There is need and use of this stochastical judging and opinion concerning truth and falsehood in human life." Those whose way of life is truly stochastic are prudent and judicious, and tend never to generalize from a skimpy sample. As Jacques Bernoulli demonstrated early in the eighteenth century, an isolated event is no harbinger of anything, but the greater your sampling of events the more likely you are to guess the true distribution of phenomena within your sample.

So much for probability theory. I pass swiftly and uneasily over Poisson distributions, the Central Limit Theorem, the Kolmogorov axioms, Ehrenhaft games, Markov chains, the Pascal triangle, and all the rest. I mean to spare you such mathematical convolutions. ("Let p be the probability of the happening of an event in a single trial, and let s be the number of times the event is observed to happen in n trials ....") My point is only that the pure stochastician teaches himself to observe what we at the Center for Stochastic Processes have come to call the Bernoulli Interval, a pause during which we ask ourselves, *Do I really have enough data to draw a valid conclusion?*

I'm executive secretary of the Center, which was incorporated four months ago, in August, 2000. Carvajal's money pays our expenses. For now we occupy a five-room house in a rural section of northern New Jersey, and I don't care to be more specific about the location. Our aim is to find ways of reducing the Bernoulli Interval to zero: that is, to make guesses of ever-increasing accuracy on the basis of an ever-decreasing statistical sample; or, to put it another way, to move from probabilistic to absolute prediction; or, rephrasing it yet again, to replace guesswork with clairvoyance.

So we work toward post-stochastic abilities. What Carvajal taught me is that stochasticity isn't the end of the line: it's merely a phase, soon to pass, in our striving toward full revelation of the future, in our struggle to free ourselves from the tyranny of randomness. In the absolute universe all events can be regarded as absolutely deterministic, and if we can't perceive the greater structures, it's because our vision is faulty. If our perceptions of cause and effect were only good enough, we'd be

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able to attain absolute knowledge of what is to come. We would make ourselves all-seeing.

4.

Carvajal is dead now, dying exactly when and as he knew he would. I am still here, and I think I know how I will die too, but I'm not altogether sure of it, and in any case it doesn't seem to matter to me the way it did to him. He never had the strength that was necessary to sustain his visions. He was just a burned-out little man with tired eyes and a drained smile, who had a gift that was too big for his soul, and it was the gift that killed him as much as anything. If I truly have inherited that gift, I hope I make a better job of living with it than he did.

Carvajal is dead, but I'm alive and will be for some time to come. All about me flutter the indistinct towers of the New York of twenty years hence, glittering in the pale light of mornings not yet born. I look at the dull porcelain bowl of the winter sky and see images of my own face, grown much older. So I am not about to vanish. I have a considerable future. I know that the future is a place as fixed and intransient and accessible as the past. Because I know this I've abandoned the wife I loved and given up the profession that was making me rich and acquired the enmity of Paul Quinn, potentially the most dangerous man in the world, Quinn who will be elected President of the United States four years from now. I'm not afraid of Quinn personally. He won't be able to harm me. He may harm democracy and free speech, but he won't harm me. I feel guilty because I will have helped put Quinn in the White House, but at least I'll share that guilt with you and you and you, with your blind mindless votes that you'll live to wish you could call back. Never mind. We can survive Quinn. I'll show the way. It will be my form of atonement. I can save you all from chaos, even now, even with Quinn astride the horizon and growing more huge every day.

5.

I was into probabilities for seven years, professionally, before I ever heard of Martin Carvajal. My business from the spring of 1992 onward was projections. I can look at the acorn and see the stack of firewood: it's a gift I have. For a fee, I would tell you whether I think particle chips will continue to be a growth industry, whether it's a good idea to open a tattooing parlor in Topeka, whether the fad for bare scalps is going to last long enough to make it worthwhile for

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you to expand your San Jose depilator factory.

My father liked to say, "A man doesn't choose his life. His life chooses him."

Maybe. I never expected to go into the prophecy trade. I never really expected to go into anything. My father feared I'd be a wastrel. Certainly it looked that way the day I collected my college diploma (NYU '86). I sailed through my three years of college not knowing at all what I wanted to do with my life, other than that it ought to be something communicative, creative, lucrative, and reasonably useful to society. I didn't want to be a novelist, a teacher, an actor, a lawyer, a stockbroker, a general, or a priest. Industry and finance didn't attract me, medicine was beyond my capabilities, politics seemed vulgar and blatant. I knew my skills, which are primarily verbal and conceptual, and I knew my needs, which are primarily security-oriented and privacy-oriented. I was and am bright, outgoing, alert, energetic, willing to work hard, and candidly opportunistic, though not, I hope, opportunistically candid. But I was missing a focus, a defining point, when college turned me loose.

A man's life chooses him. I had always had an odd knack for uncanny hunches; by easy stages I turned that into my livelihood. As a summer fill-in job I did some part-time polltaking; one day in the office I happened to make a few astute comments about the pattern the raw data was showing, and my boss invited me to prepare a projective sampling template for the next step of the poll. That's a program that tells you what sort of questions you ought to ask in order to get the answers you need. When one of my employer's big clients asked me to quit and do free-lance consulting work, I took the chance. From there to my own full-time consulting firm was only a matter of months.

When I was in the projection business, many uninformed folk thought I was a pollster. No. Pollsters worked for *me,* a whole platoon of hired gallups. They were to me as millers are to a baker: they sorted the wheat from the chaff; I produced the seven-layer cakes. Using data samples collected by the usual quasi-scientific methods, I derived far-ranging predictions, I made intuitive leaps, in short I guessed, and guessed well. There was money in it, but also I felt a kind of ecstasy. When I confronted a mound of raw samples from which I had to pull a major projection, I felt like a diver plunging off a high cliff into a sparkling blue sea, seeking a glittering gold doubloon hidden in the white sand far below the waves:

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my heart pounded, my mind whirled, my body and my spirit underwent a quantum kick into a higher, more intense energy state. Ecstasy.

What I did was sophisticated and highly technical, but it was a species of witchcraft, too. I wallowed in harmonic means, positive skews, modal values, and parameters of dispersion. My office was a maze of display screens and graphs. I kept a battery of jumbo computers running around the clock and what looked like a wristwatch on my wrong arm was actually a data terminal. But the heavy math and the high-powered Hollywood technology were simply aspects of the preliminary phases of my work, the intake stage. When actual projections had to be made, IBM couldn't help me. I had to do my trick with nothing but my unaided mind. I would stand in a dreadful solitude on the edge of that cliff; and though sonar may have told me the configuration of the ocean bottom, though GE's finest transponders had registered the velocity of current flow and the water's temperature and turbidity index, I was altogether on my own in the crucial moment of realization. I would scan the water with narrowed eyes, flexing my knees, swinging my arms, filling my lungs with air, waiting until I *saw*, until I truly *saw;* and when I felt that beautiful confident dizziness back of my eyebrows, I would jump at last; I would launch myself headlong into the surging sea in search of that doubloon; I would shoot naked and unprotected and unerring toward my goal.

6.

From September of 1997 until the late winter of 2000. Seven or eight months ago, June of 2000, I was obsessed with the idea of making Paul Quinn President of the United States.

Obsessed. That's a strong word. It smacks of Sacher-Masoch, Krafft-Ebing, ritual handwashing, rubber undergarments. Yet I think it precisely describes my involvement with Quinn and his ambitions.

Haig Mardikian introduced me to Quinn in the summer of '95. Haig and I went to private school together — the Dalton, circa 1980-82, where we played a lot of basketball — and we've kept in touch ever since. He's a slick lynx-eyed lawyer about three meters tall who wants to be, among many other things, the first United States Attorney General of Armenian ancestry, and probably will be. (Probably? How can I doubt it?) On a sweltering August afternoon he phoned to say,

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"Sarkisian is having a big splash tonight. You're invited. I guarantee that something good will come out of it for you." Sarkisian is a real-estate operator who, so it seems, owns both sides of the Hudson River for six or seven hundred kilometers.

"Who'll be there?" I asked. "Aside from Ephrikian, Missakian, Hagopian, Manoogian, Garabedian, and Boghosian."

"Berberian and Khatisian," he said. "Also —" And Mardikian ran off a brilliant, a dazzling list of celebrities from the worlds of finance, politics, industry, science, and the arts, ending with "— and Paul Quinn." Meaningful emphasis on that final name.

"Should I know him, Haig?"

"You should, but right now you probably don't. At present he's the Assemblyman from Riverdale. A man who'll be going places in public life."

"What time?" I asked.

"Nine," Mardikin said.

So to Sarkisian's place: a triplex penthouse atop a 90-story circular alabaster-and-onyx condo tower on a Lower West Side offshore platform. Blank-faced guards who might just as well have been constructs of metal and plastic checked my identity, scanned me for weapons, and admitted me. The air within was a blue haze. The sour, spicy odor of powdered bone dominated everything: we were smoking doped calcium that year. Crystalline oval windows like giant portholes ringed the entire apartment. In the eastward-facing rooms the view was blocked by the two monolithic slabs of the World Trade Center, but elsewhere Sarkisian did provide a 270-degree panorama of New York Harbor, New Jersey, the West Side Expressway, and maybe some of Pennsylvania. Only in one of the giant wedge-shaped rooms were the portholes opaqued, and when I went into an adjoining wedge and peered at a sharp angle, I found out why: that side of the tower faced the still-undemolished stump of the Statue of Liberty, and Sarkisian apparently didn't want the depressing sight to bring his guests down. (This was the summer of '95, remember, which was one of the more violent years of the decade, and the bombing still had everyone jittery.)

The guests! They were as promised, a spectacular swarm of contraltos and astronauts and quarterbacks and chairpersons of the board. Costumes ran to formal-flamboyant, with the expectable display of breasts and genitalia but also the first hints, from the avant-garde, of the *fin de siecle* love of concealment that now has taken over, high throats and tight bandeaux. Half a dozen of the

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men and several of the women affected clerical garb, and there must have been fifteen pseudo generals bedecked with enough medals to shame an African dictator. I was dressed rather simply, I thought, in a pleatless radiation-green singlet and a three-strand bubble-necklace. Though the rooms were crowded, the flow of the party was far from formless, for I saw eight or ten big, swarthy, outgoing men in subdued clothing, key members of Haig Mardikian's ubiquitous Armenian mafia, distributed equidistantly through the main room like cribbage pegs, like goalposts, like pylons, each occupying a preassigned fixed position and efficiently offering smokes and drinks, making introductions, directing people toward other people whose acquaintance it might be desirable for them to make. I was drawn easily into this subtle gridwork, had my hand mangled by Ara Garabedian or Jason Komurjian or perhaps George Missakian, and found myself inserted into orbit on a collision course with a sunny-faced golden-haired woman named Autumn, with whom I went home many hours later.

Long before Autumn and I came to that, though, I had been smoothly nudged through a long musical-chairs rotation of conversational partners, during the course of which I —

— found myself talking to a female person who was black, witty, stunning-looking, and half a meter taller than I am, and whom I correctly guessed to be Ilene Mulamba, the head of Network Four, a meeting which led to my getting a consulting contract for design of their split-signal ethnic-zone telecasts —

— gently deflected the playful advances of City Councilman Ronald Holbrecht, the self-styled Voice of the Gay Community and the first man outside California to win an election with Homophile Party endorsement —

— wandered into a conversation between two tall white-haired men who looked like bankers and discovered them to be bioenergetics specialists from Bellevue and Columbia-Presbyterian, swapping gossip about their current sono-puncture work, which involved ultrasonic treatment of advanced bone malignancies —

— listened to an executive from CBS Labs telling a goggle-eyed young man about their newly developed charisma-enhancement biofeedback loop gadget —

— learned that the goggle-eyed young man was Lamont Friedman of the sinister and multifarious investment-banking house of Asgard Equities —

— exchanged trifling chitchat

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with Noel MacIver of the Ganymede Expedition, Claude Parks of the Dope Patrol (who had brought his molecular sax and didn't need much encouragement to play it), three pro basketball stars and some luminous right-fielder, an organizer for the new civil-service prostitutes' union, a municipal brothel inspector, an assortment of less trendy city officials, and the Brooklyn Museum's Curator of Transient Arts, Mei-ling Pulvermacher —

— had my first encounter with a Transit Creed proctor, the petite but forceful Ms. Catalina Yarber, just arrived from San Francisco, whose attempt to convert me on the spot I declined with oblique excuses —

— and met Paul Quinn.

Quinn, yes. Sometimes I wake, quivering and perspiring, from a dreamed replay of that party in which I see myself swept by an irresistible current through a sea of yammering celebrities toward the golden, smiling figure of Paul Quinn, who waits for me like Charybdis, eyes agleam, jaws agape. Quinn was 34 then, five years my senior, a short, powerful-looking man, blond, broad shoulders, wide-set blue eyes, a warm smile, conservative clothes, a rough masculine handshake, grabbing you by the inside of your biceps as well as by your hand, making eye contact with an almost audible snap, establishing instant rapport. All that was standard political technique, and I had seen it often enough before, but never with this degree of intensity and power. Quinn leaped across the person-person gap so quickly and so confidently that I began to suspect he must be wearing one of those CBS charisma-enhancement loops in his earlobe. Mardikian told him my name, and right away he was into me with, "You're one of the people I was most eager to meet here tonight," and, "Call me Paul" and, "Let's go where it's a little quieter, Lew," and I knew I was being expertly conned, and yet I was nailed despite myself.

He led me to a little salon a few rooms northwest of the main room. Pre-Columbian clay figurines, African masks, pulsar screens, splash-stands — a nice mixture of old and new decorative notions. The wallpaper was *New York Times*, vintage 1980 or so. "Some party," Quinn said, grinning. He ran quickly down the guest list, sharing with me a small-boy awe at being among such celebrities.

Then he narrowed the focus and moved in on me.

He had been well briefed. He knew all about me, where I had gone to school, what my degree was in, what sort of work I did, where

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my office was. He asked if I had brought my wife — "Sundara, isn't that her name? Asian background?"

"Her family's from India."

"She's said to be quite beautiful."

"She's in Oregon this month."

"I hope I'll get a chance to meet her. Perhaps next time I'm out Richmond way I'll give you a call, yes? How do you like living on Staten Island, anyway?"

I had seen this before, too, the full Treatment, the politician's computerized mind at work, as though a nugget of microcircuitry were going click-click-click in there whenever facts were needed, and for a moment I suspected he might be some sort of robot. But Quinn was too good to be unreal. On one level he was simply feeding back everything he had been told about me, and making an impressive performance of it, but on another level he was communicating his amusement at the outrageous excessiveness of his own con job, as though inwardly winking and telling me, *I've got to pile it on, Lew, that's the way I'm supposed to play this dumb game.* Also he seemed to be picking up and reflecting the fact that I too was both amused and awed by his skill. He was good. He was frighteningly good. My mind went into automatic project and handed me a series of *Times* headlines that went something like this:

BRONX ASSEMBLYMAN QUINN ATTACKS SLUM-CLEARANCE DELAYS MAYOR QUINN CALLS FOR CITY CHARTER REFORM SENATOR QUINN SAYS HE'LL SEEK WHITE HOUSE QUINN LEADS NEW DEMOCRATS TO NATIONWIDE LANDSLIDE PRESIDENT QUINN'S FIRST TERM: AN APPRAISAL

He went on talking, all the while smiling, maintaining eye contact, holding me impaled.

"They say you've got the best reliability index of any projector in the Northeast .... I'll bet not even you anticipated the Gottfried assassination, though .... You don't have to be much of a prophet to feel sorry for poor dopey DiLaurenzio, trying to run City Hall at a time like this .... This city can't be governed, it has to be juggled .... Are you as repelled by that phony Neighborhood Authority Act as I am? ... What do you think of Con Ed's 23rd St. fusion project? ... You ought to see the flow charts they found in Gottfried's office safe ...." Deftly he plumbed for common grounds in political philosophy, though he had to be aware I shared most of his beliefs, for if he knew so much about me, he would know I was a registered New Democrat, that I

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felt as he did about priorities and reforms and the whole inane Puritan idea of trying to legislate morality. The longer we spoke, the more strongly I was drawn to him.

I began making quiet unsettling comparisons between Quinn and some great politicans of the past — FDR, Rockefeller, Johnson, the original Kennedy. They had all had that warm beautiful doublethink knack of being able to play out the rituals of political conquest and simultaneously to indicate to their more intelligent victims that nobody's being fooled, we all know it's just a ritual, but don't you think I'm good at it? Even then, even that first night in 1995, when he was just a kid assemblyman unknown outside his own borough, I saw him heading into political history alongside Roosevelt and JFK. Later I began making more grandiose comparisons, between Quinn and the likes of Napoleon, Alexander the Great, even Jesus, and if such talk makes you snicker, please remember that I am a master of the stochastic arts and my vision is clearer than yours.

Quinn said nothing to me then about running for higher office. As we returned to the party, he simply remarked, "It's too early for me to be setting up a staff. But when I do, I'll want you. Haig will be in touch."

"What did you think of him?" Mardikian asked me five minutes later.

"He'll be Mayor of New York City in '98."

"And then?"

"You want to know more, man, you get in touch with my office and make an appointment. Fifty an hour, and I'll give you the whole crystal-balling."

He jabbed my arm lightly and strode away, laughing.

Ten minutes after that, I was sharing a pipe with the golden-haired lady named Autumn. Autumn Hawkes, she was, the much-hailed new Met soprano. Quickly we negotiated an agreement, eyes only, the silent language of the body, concerning the rest of the night. I was undeceived about her real preference, though, for I saw her looking hungrily at Paul Quinn far across the room, and her eyes glowed. Quinn was here on business; no woman could bag him. (No man either!) "I wonder if he sings," Autumn said wistfully.

"You'd like to try some duets with him?"

"Isolde to his Tristan. Turandot to his Calaf. Aida to his Radames."

"You admire his political ideas?"

"I could, if I knew what they were."

I said, "He's liberal and sane."

"Then I admire his political

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ideas. I also think he's overpoweringly masculine and superbly beautiful."

"Politicians on the make are said to be inadequate lovers."

She shrugged. "Hearsay evidence never impresses me. I can look at a man — one glance will do — and know instantly whether he's adequate."

"Thank you," I said.

"Save the compliments. Sometimes I'm wrong, of course," she said, poisonously sweet. "Not always, but sometimes."

"Sometimes I am too."

"About women?"

"About anything. I have second sight, you know. The future is an open book to me."

"You sound serious," she said.

"I am. It's the way I earn my living. Projections."

"What do you see in my future?" she asked, half coy, half in earnest.

"Immediate," I said, "a night of wild revelry and a peaceful morning stroll in a light drizzle. Long range, triumph upon triumph, fame, a villa in Majorca, two divorces, happiness late in life."

"Are you a Gypsy fortuneteller, then?"

I shook my head. "Merely a stochastic technician, milady."

She glanced toward Quinn. "What do you see ahead for him?"

"Him? He's going to be President. At the very least."

7.

There was no immediate follow-up to my meeting with Paul Quinn, but I hadn't expected one. New York City's political life was in wild flux just then. Only a few weeks before Sarkisian's party, a disgruntled jobseeker had approached Mayor Gottfried at a Liberal Party banquet and, removing the half-eaten grapefruit from the astrounded mayor's plate, had clapped a gram of *ascenseur,* the new French political explosive, in its place. Exeunt His Honor, the assassin, four county chairmen, and a waiter, in one glorious boom. Which created a power vacuum in the city, for everyone had assumed the formidable mayor would be elected to another four or five terms, and suddenly the invincible Gottfried wasn't there, as though God had died one Sunday morning just as the cardinal was starting to serve the bread and wine. The new mayor, former City Council President DiLaurenzio, was a nonentity. It was taken for granted that DiLaurenzio was an interim figure who could be pushed aside in the '97 mayoralty election by any reasonably strong candidate. And Quinn was waiting in the wings.

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I heard nothing from or about him all fall. The legislature was in session and Quinn was at his desk in Albany, which is like being on Mars so far as anybody in New York City cares. In the city the usual weird circus was going full blast, only more so than usual now that the potent Freudian force that was Mayor Gottfried, the Urban Allfather, dark of brow and long of nose, guardian of the weak and castrator of the unruly, had been removed from the scene. The 125th Street Militia, a new black self-determination force that had been boasting for months that it was buying tanks from Syria, not only unveiled three armored monsters at a noisy press conference but proceeded to send them across Columbus Avenue on a search-and-destroy mission into Hispano-Manhattan, leaving four blocks in flames and dozens dead. In October, while the blacks were celebrating Marcus Garvey Day, the Puerto Ricans retaliated with a commando raid on Harlem. The commandos, in a lightning strike up Lenox Avenue, not only blew up the tank garage and all three tanks, but took out five liquor stores and the main Numbers computer center, while a diversionary force slipped westward to firebomb the Apollo Theater.

A few weeks later at the site of the West 23rd Street Fusion Plant there was a shootout between the pro-fusion group, Keep Our Cities Bright, and the anti-fusionists, Concerned Citizens Against Uncontrollable Technology. Four Con Edison security men were lynched, and there were 32 fatalities among the demonstrators, 21 KOCB and 11 CCAUT, including a lot of politically involved young mothers on both sides and even a few babes in arms; this caused much horror and outcry (even in New York you can stir strong emotions by gunning babies during a demonstration) and Mayor DiLaurenzio found it expedient to appoint a study group to reexamine the whole question of building fusion plants within city limits. Since this amounted to a victory for CCAUT, a KOCB strike force blockaded City Hall and began planting protest mines in the shrubbery, but they were driven off by a Police Tac Squad strafing 'copter at a cost of nine more lives. The *Times* put the story on page 27.

Mayor DiLaurenzio, speaking from his Auxiliary City Hall somewhere in the East Bronx — he had set up seven offices in outlying boroughs, all in Italian neighborhoods, the exact locations being carefully guarded secrets — issued renewed lawnorder pleas. However, nobody in the city paid much attention to the mayor, partly because he was such a *nebbish* and

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partly as an overcompensating reaction to the removal of the brooding, sinister, overwhelming presence of Gottfried the Gauleiter. An editorial in *The Wall Street Journal* suggested suspending the upcoming mayoralty election and placing New York City under a military administration, with a *cordon sanitaire* to keep infectious New Yorkism from contaminating the rest of the country.

"I think a U.N. peacekeeping force would be a better idea," Sundara said. This was early December, the night of the season's first blizzard. "This isn't a city, it's a staging ground for all the accumulated racial and ethnic hostilities of the last three thousand years."

"That's not so," I told her. "Old grudges don't mean crap here. Hindus sleep with Paks in New York, Turks and Armenians go into partnership and open restaurants. In this city we invent *new* ethnic hostilities. New York is nothing if it isn't avant-garde. You'd understand that if you'd lived here all your life the way I have."

"I feel as though I have."

"Six years doesn't make you a native."

"Six years in the middle of constant guerrilla warfare feels longer than thirty years anywhere else," she said.

Oh-oh. Her voice was playful, but her dark eyes held a malicious sparkle. She was daring me to parry, to contradict, to challenge. I felt the air about me glowing feverishly. Suddenly we were drifting into the I-hate-New-York conversation, always productive of rifts between us, and soon we would be quarreling in earnest. A native can hate New York with love; an outsider, and my Sundara would always be an outsider here, draws tense and heavy energy out of repudiating this lunatic place she has chosen to live in and grows bloated and murderous with unearned fury.

Heading off trouble, I said, "Well, let's move to Arizona."

"Hey, that's my line!"

"I'm sorry. I must have missed my cue."

The tension was gone. "This *is* an awful city, Lew."

"Try Tucson, then. The winters are much better. You want to smoke, love?"

"Yes, but not that bone thing again."

"Plain old prehistoric dope?"

"Please," she said. I got the stash. The air between us was limpid and loving. We had been together four years, and though some dissonances had appeared, we were still each other's best friend. As I rolled the smokes, she stroked the muscles of my neck,

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cunningly hitting the pressure points and letting the twentieth century slide out of my ligaments and vertebrae. Her parents were from Bombay, but she had been born in Los Angeles, and yet her supple fingers played Radha to my Krishna as though she were a *padmini* of the Hindu dawn, a lotus-woman fully versed in the erotic shastras and the sutras of the flesh, which in truth she was.

The terrors and traumas of New York City seemed indecently remote as we stood by our long crystalline window, close to one another, staring into the wintry moon-bright night and seeing only our own reflections, tall fair-haired man and slender dark woman, side by side, side by side, allies against the darkness.

We passed the smoke back and forth, languidly letting fingers caress fingers at each interchange. She seemed perfect to me just then, my wife, my love, my other self, witty and graceful, mysterious and exotic, high forehead, blue-black hair, full-moon face — but a moon eclipsed, a moon empurpled by shadow; the perfect lotus-woman of the sutras, skin fine and tender, eyes brilliant and beautiful as a fawn's, well defined and red at the corners, breasts hard and full and uplifted, neck elegant, nose straight and gracious. *Yoni* like an open lotus-bud, voice as low and melodious as the *kokila*-bird's, my prize, my love, my companion, my alient bride. Within twelve hours I would set myself on the path toward losing her, which perhaps is why I studied her with such intensity this snowy evening, and yet I knew nothing of what would happen, nothing, I knew nothing. Only I must have known.

Deliriously stoned, we sprawled snugly on the rough-skinned, nubby yellow-and-red couch in front of our big window. The moon was full, a chilly white beacon splashing the city with ice-pure light. Snowflakes glittered beautifully on swirling updrafts outside. Our view was of the shining towers of downtown Brooklyn just across the harbor. Far-off, exotic Brooklyn, darkest Brooklyn, Brooklyn red in fang and claw. What was going on over there tonight in the jungle of low grubby streets behind the glistening waterfront facade of high-rises? What maimings, what garrotings, what gunplay, what profits and what losses? While we nestled our weedy heads in warm happy privacy, the less privileged were experiencing the true New York in that melancholy borough. Bands of marauding seven-year-olds were braving the fierce snow to harass weary home-going widows on Flatbush Avenue, and boys armed with needle torches were gleefully cutting the bars on

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lion cages in Prospect Park Zoo, and rival gangs of barely pubescent prostitutes, bare-thighed in gaudy thermal undershifts and aluminum coronets, were holding their vicious nightly territorial face-offs at Grand Army Plaza. Here's to you, good old New York. Here's to you, Mayor DiLaurenzio, benign and sanguine unexpected leader. And here's to you, Sundara, my love. This too is the true New York, the handsome young rich ones safe in their warm towers, the creators and devisers and shapers, the favorites of the gods. If we were not here, it would not be New York, but only a large and malevolent encampment of suffering maladjusted poor, casualties of the urban holocaust; crime and grime by themselves do not a New York make. There must also be glamor, and, for better, for worse, Sundara and I were part of that.

Zeus flung noisy handfuls of hail at our impervious window. We laughed. My hands slipped down over Sundara's smooth small hard-nippled flawless breasts, and with my toe I flicked the stud of our recorder, and from the speakers came her deep musical voice. A taped reading from the *Kama Sutra*. "Chapter Seven. The various ways to hit a woman and the accompanying sounds. Sexual intercourse can be compared to a lover's quarrel, because of the little annoyances so easily caused by love and the tendency on the part of two passionate individuals to change swiftly from love to anger. In the intensity of passion one often hits the lover on the body, and the parts of the body where these blows of love should be dealt are: The shoulders — the head — the space between the breasts — the back — the *jaghana* — the sides. There are also four ways of hitting the loved one: With the back of the hand — with the fingers slightly contracted — with the fist — with the palm of the hand. These blows are painful and the person hit often emits a cry of pain. There are eight sounds of pleasurable anguish which correspond to the different kinds of blows. These are the sounds: *Hinn phoutt — phatt — soutt — platt —*"

And, as I touched her skin, as her skin touched mine, she smiled and whispered in unison with her own taped voice, her tone a bare sixth deeper now, "*Hinn ... phoutt ... soutt ... platt ....*"

8.

I was at my office by half past eight the next morning, and Haig Mardikian phoned exactly at nine.

"Do you really get fifty an hour?" he asked.

"I try to."

"I've got an interesting job for

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you, but the party in question can't go fifty."

"Who's the party? What's the job?"

"Paul Quinn. Needs a data-sampling director and campign strategist."

"Quinn's running for mayor?"

"He figures it'll be easy to knock off DiLaurenzio in the primary, and the Republicans don't have anybody. So the moment is right to make his move."

"It sure is," I said. "The job is full time?"

"Very part time most of next year, then full time from the fall of '96 through to election day '97. Can you clear your long-range schedule for us?"

"This isn't just consulting work, Haig. It means going into politics."

"So?"

"What do I need it for?"

"Nobody needs anything except a little food and water now and then. The rest is preferences."

"I hate the political thing, Haig, especially local politics. I've seen enough of it just doing free-lance projections. You have to eat so much crap. You have to compromise yourself in so many ugly ways. You have to be willing to expose yourself to so much —"

"We're not asking you to be the candidate, boy. Only to help plan the campaign."

"Only. You want a year out of my life, and —"

"What makes you think Quinn will settle just for a year?"

"You make this terribly enticing."

Haig said, after a bit, "There are powerful possibilities in it."

"I know what you mean. Still, power's not everything."

"Are you available, Lew?"

I let him dangle a moment. Or he let me dangle. Finally I said, "For you the price is forty."

"Quinn can go twenty-five now, thirty-five once the contributions start rolling in."

"And then a retroactive thirty-five for me?"

"Twenty-five now, thirty-five when we can afford it," Mardikian said. "No retroactive."

"Why should I take a pay cut? Less money for dirtier work?"

"For Quinn. For this god-damned city, Lew. He's the only man who can —"

"Sure. But am *I* the only man who can help him do it?"

"You're the best we can get. No, that sounds wrong. You're the best, Lew. Period. No con job."

"What's the staff going to be like?"

"All control centered in five key figures. You'd be one. I'd be another."

"As campaign manager?"

"Right. Missakian is coordin-

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ator of communications and media relations. Ephrikian is borough liaison."

"What does that mean?"

"Patronage man. And the finance coordinator is a guy named Bob Lombroso, currently very big on Wall Street, who—"

"Lombroso? Is that Italian? No. Wait. What a stroke of genius! You managed to find a Wall Street Puerto to be your moneyman."

"He's a Jew," said Mardikian, with a little dry laugh. "Lombroso is an old Jewish name, he tells me. We have a terrific team, Lombroso, Ephrikian, Missakian, Mardikian, and Nichols. You're our token WASP."

"How do you know I'm coming in with you, Haig?"

"I never doubted that you would."

"How do you *know?*"

"You think you're the only one who can see the future?"

9.

So early in '96 we set up our headquarters on the ninth floor of an old-weatherbeaten Park Avenue tower and we set about the job of making Paul Quinn mayor of this absurd city. It didn't look hard. The candidate was attractive, intelligent, dedicated, ambitious, self-evidently capable; therefore we had no image-making to do, no plastic-man cosmetic jobs.

The city had been dismissed as moribund so often, and so often had shown new twitches of unmistakable vitality, that the cliche concept of New York as a dying metropolis had finally gone out of fashion. Only fools or demagogues raised the point now. New York was supposed to have perished a generation ago, when the civil-service unions got hold of the town and began squeezing it mercilessly. But the long-legged go-getter Lindsay resurrected it into Fun City, only to have the fun turn into nightmare as skeletons armed with grenades began emerging from every closet. That was when New York found out what a *real* dying city was like; the previous period of decline started looking like a golden age. The white middle class split in a panicky exodus; taxes rose to repressive levels to keep essential services going in a city where half the people were too poor to pay the costs of upkeep; major businesses responded by whisking their headquarters off to leafy suburbs, further eroding the tax base. Byzantine ethnic rivalries exploded in every neighborhood. Muggers lurked behind every lamppost. How could such a plaguey city survive? The climate was hateful, the citizenry malign, the air foul, the architecture a disgrace, and a

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cluster of self-accelerating processes had whittled the economic base alarmingly.

But the city did survive, and even flourished. There was that harbor, there was the river, there was the happy geographical placement that made New York an indispensable neural nexus for the whole eastern coast, a ganglionic switchboard that couldn't be discarded. More: the city had attained, in its bizarre sweaty density, a kind of critical mass, a level of cultural activity that made it a breeder reactor for the soul, self-enriching, self-powering, for there was so much happening even in a moribund New York that the city simply could not die, it needs must go on throbbing and spewing forth the fevers of life, endlessly rekindling and renewing itself. An irrepressible lunatic energy ticked on and on at the city's heart and always would.

Not dying, then. But there were problems.

You could cope with the polluted air with masks and filters. You could deal with the crime the way you did with blizzards or summer heat, negatively by avoidance, positively by technological counterattack. Either you carried no valuables, moved with agility in the streets, and stayed indoors behind many locks as much as possible, or you equipped yourself with space-positive alarm systems, with antipersonnel batons, with security cones radiating from circuitry in the lining of your clothing, and went out to brave the yahoos. Coping. But the white middle class was gone, probably forever, and that caused difficulties that the electronics boys couldn't fix. The city, by 1990, was largely black and Puerto Rican, dotted with two sorts of enclaves, one kind dwindling (the pockets of aging Jews and Italians and Irish) and one steadily expanding in size and power (the dazzling islands of the affluent, the managerial and creative classes). A city populated only by rich and by poor experiences certain nasty spiritual dislocations, and it will be a while before the emerging nonwhite bourgeoisie is a real force for social stability. Much of New York glitters as only Athens, Constantinople, Rome, Babylon, and Persepolis glittered in the past; the rest is a jungle, a literal jungle, fetid and squalid, where force is the only law. It is not so much a dying city as an ungovernable one, seven million souls moving in seven million orbits under spectacular centrifugal pressures that threaten at any moment to make hyperbolas of us all.

Who can govern the ungovernable? Someone always is willing to try, God help him. Out of our

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hundred-odd mayors some have been honest, and many have been crooks, and about seven, all told, were competent and effective administrators. Two of those were crooks, but never mind their morals, for they knew how to make the city work as well as anybody. Some were stars, some were disasters, and they all, in the aggregate, helped to nudge the city toward its ultimate entropic debacle. And now Quinn. He promised greatness, combining, so it seemed, the force and vigor of a Gottfried, the glamor of a Lindsay, the humanity and compassion of a LaGuardia.

So we put him into the New Democratic primary against the feckless, helpless DiLaurenzio. Bob Lombroso milked the banking houses for millions, George Missakian put together a string of straightforward TV spots featuring many of the celebrities who had been at that party, Ara Ephrikian bartered commissionerships for support on the clubhouse level, and I dropped in at headquarters now and then with simple-minded projective reports that said nothing more profound than

play it safe
keep on truckin'
we've got it made.

Everybody expected Quinn to sweep the field, and in fact he took the primary with an absolute majority in a list of seven. The Republicans found a banker named Burgess to accept their nomination. He was unknown, a political novice, and I don't know if they were feeling suicidal or simply being realistic. A poll taken a month before the election gave Quinn 83 percent of the vote. That missing 17 percent bothered him. He wanted it all, and he vowed to take his campaign to the people. No candidate in twenty years had done the motorcade - and - handshake routine here, but he insisted on overruling a fretful, assassination-minded Mardikian.

Quinn went forth and pressed the flesh. Maybe it helped. He won the biggest election victory in New York history, an 88 percent plurality. On the first of January, 1998, an unseasonably mild, almost Floridian day, Haig Mardikian and Bob Lombroso and the rest of us in the inner circle clustered close on the steps of City Hall to watch our man take the oath of office. Vague disquiet churned inside me. What did I fear? I couldn't tell. A bomb, maybe. Yes, a shiny round black comic-strip bomb with a sizzling fuse, whistling through the air to blow us all to mesons and quarks. No bomb was thrown. Why such a bird of ill omen, Nichols? Rejoice! I remained edgy. Backs were slapped, cheeks were kissed. Paul

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Quinn was Mayor of New York, and happy 1998 to all.

10.

"If Quinn wins," Sundara said one night late in the summer of '97. "will he offer you a job in his administration?"

"Probably."

"Will you take it?"

"Not a chance," I told her. "Running a campaign is fun. Day-by-day municipal government is just a grubby bore. I'm going back to my regular clients as soon as the election's over."

Three days after the election, Quinn sent for me and offered me the post of Special Administrative Assistant, and I accepted, without hesitation, without one thought for my clients or my employees or my shiny office full of data-processing equipment.

Was I lying to Sundara on that summer night, then? No, the one I had been fooling was myself. My projection was faulty because my self-understanding had been imperfect. What I learned between August and November is that proximity to power becomes addictive. For more than a year I had been drawing vitality from Paul Quinn. When you spend so much time so close to so much power, you get hooked on the energy flow, you become a juice-junkie. You don't willingly walk away from the dynamo that's been nourishing you. When, as mayor-elect, Quinn hired me, he said he needed me, and I could buy that, but more truthfully I needed him. Quinn was poised for a huge surging leap, a brilliant cometlike passage through the dark night of American politics, and I yearned to be part of his train, to catch some of his fire and be warmed by it. It was that simple and that humiliating. I was free to pretend that by serving Quinn I was participating in a grand exciting crusade to save the greatest of our cities, that I was helping to pull modern urban civilization back from the abyss and give it purpose and viability. It might even be true. But what drew me to Quinn was the attraction of power, power in the abstract, power for its own sake, the power to mold and shape and transform. Saving New York was incidental; riding the lines of force was what I craved.

Our whole campaign team went right into the new city administration. Quinn named Haig Mardikian his Deputy Mayor and Bob Lombroso his Finance Administrator. George Missakian became Media Coordinator and Ara Ephrikian was named head of the City Planning Commission.

My own job was amorphous, evanescent: I was private adviser,

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hunch maker, troubleshooter, the misty presence behind the throne. I was supposed to use my intuitive faculties to keep Quinn a couple of steps ahead of cataclysm, this in a city where the wolves descend on the mayor if the weather bureau lets an unexpected snowstorm slip into town. For this I took a pay cut amounting to about half the money I would have made as a private consultant. But my municipal salary was still more than I really needed. And there was another reward: the ecstatic knowledge that as Paul Quinn climbed, I would climb with him.

Right into the White House.

I had felt the imminence of Quinn's presidency that first night in '95, Sarkisian's party, and Haig Mardikian felt it long before that. The Italians have a word, *papabile*, to describe a cardinal who might plausibly become Pope. Quinn was presidentially *papabile*. He was young, personable, energetic, independent, a classic Kennedy figure; and for forty years Kennedy types had had a mystic hold on the electorate. He was unknown outside of New York, sure, but that scarcely mattered: with all urban crises running at an intensity 250 percent above the levels of a generation ago, anybody who shows he's capable of governing a major city automatically becomes a potential President, and if New York did not break Quinn the way it broke Lindsay in the sixties, he would have a national reputation in a year or two. And then —

By early autumn of '97, with the mayoralty already as good as won, I found myself becoming concerned, in what I soon recognized to be an obsessive way, with Quinn's chances for a presidential nomination. I *felt* him as President, if not in 2000, then four years later. But merely making the prediction wasn't enough. I played with Quinn's presidency the way a little boy plays with himself, exciting myself with the idea, manipulating pleasure for myself out of it, getting off on it.

Privately, secretly — for I felt abashed at such premature scheming; I didn't want cold-eyed pros like Mardikian and Lombroso to know I was already enmeshed in misty masturbatory fantasies of our hero's distant glowing future, though I suppose they must have been thinking similar thoughts themselves by then — I drew up endless lists of politicans worth cultivating in places like California and Florida and Texas, charted the dynamics of the national electoral blocs, concocted intricate schemas representing the power vortices of a national nominating convention, set up an infinity of simulated scenarios for the election itself. All

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this was, as I say, obsessive in nature, meaning that I returned again and again, eagerly, impatiently, unavoidably, in any free moment, to my projections and analyses.

Everyone has some controlling obsession, some fixation that becomes an armature for the construct that is his life: thus we make ourselves into stamp collectors, gardeners, skycyclists, marathon hikers, sniffers, fornicators. We all have the same kind of void within, and each of us fills that void in essentially the same way, no matter what kind of stuffing for the emptiness we choose. I mean we pick the cure we like best, but we all have the same disease.

So I dreamed dreams of President Quinn. I thought he deserved the job, for one thing. Not only was he a compelling leader, but he was humane, sincere, and responsive to the needs of the people. (That is, his political philosophy sounded much like mine.) But also I was finding in myself a need to involve myself in the advancement of other people's careers — to ascend vicariously, quietly placing my stochastic skills at the services of others. There was some subterranean kick in it for me, growing out of a complex hunger for power coupled with a wish for self-effacement, a feeling that I was most invulnerable when least visible. I couldn't become President myself — I wasn't willing to put myself through the turbulence, the exertion, the exposure, and that fierce gratuitous loathing that the public so readily bestows on those who seek its love. But by toiling to make Paul Quinn President I could slip into the White House anyway, by the back door, without laying myself bare, without taking the real risks. There's the root of the obsession most nakedly revealed. I meant to use Paul Quinn and let him think he was using me. I had identified myself, *au fond,* with him: he was, for me, my alter ego, my walking mask, my catspaw, my puppet, my front man. I wanted to rule. I wanted power. I wanted to be President, King, Emperor, Pope, Dalai Lama. Through Quinn I would get there in the only way I could. I would hold the reins of the man who held the reins. And thus I would be my own father and everybody else's big daddy too.

11.

There was one frosty day late in March '99 that started like most of the other days since I had gone to work for Paul Quinn, but went off on an unexpected track before afternoon arrived. I was up at quarter past seven, as usual.

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Quick breakfast, out of the house by eight, commuter pod to Manhattan. My first stop was my uptown office, my old Lew Nichols Associates office, which I was maintaining with a skeleton staff during my time on the city payroll. There I handled routine projective analysis of minor administrative hassles — the siting of a new school, the closing of an old hospital, zoning changes to allow a new wipe-out center for brain-injured sniffers in a residential district, all trivia but potentially explosive trivia in a city where every citizen's nerves are taut beyond hope of slackening and small disappointments quickly start looking like insupportable rebuffs. Then, about noon, I headed downtown to the Municipal Building for conference and lunch with Bob Lombroso.

"Mr. Lombroso has a visitor in his office," the receptionist told me, "but he'd like you to go on inside anyway."

Lombroso's office was a fitting stage for him. He is a tall, well-set-up man in his late thirties, somewhat theatrical in appearance, a commanding figure with dark curling hair silvering at the temples, a black coarse close-cropped beard, a flashing smile, and the energetic, intense manner of a successful rug merchant. His office, redecorated from standard Early Bureaucrat at his own expense, was an ornate Levantine den, fragrant and warm, with dark shining leather-paneled walls, dense carpets, heavy brown velvet draperies, dim bronze Spanish lamps perforated in a thousand places, a gleaming desk made of several somber woods inlaid with plaques of tooled morocco, great white urnlike Chinese floor vases, and, in a baroque glass-fronted credenza, his cherished collection of medieval Judaica — silver headpieces, breastplates, and pointers for the scrolls of the Law, embroidered Torah curtains out of the synagogues of Tunisia or Iran, filigreed Sabbath lamps, candlesticks, spiceboxes, candelabra. In this musky cloistered sanctuary Lombroso reigned over the municipal revenues like a prince of Zion: woe betide the foolish Gentile who disdained his counsel.

His visitor was a faded-looking little man, fifty-five or sixty years old, a slight, insignificant person with a narrow oval head sparsely thatched with short gray hair. He was dressed so plainly, in a shabby old brown suit out of the Eisenhower era, that he made Lombroso's nippy-dip sartorialism seem like the most extreme peacock extravagance and even made me feel like a dandy in my five - year - old copper - threaded maroon cape. He sat quietly,

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slouched, hands interlocked. He looked anonymous and close to invisible, one of nature's natural-born Smiths, and there was a leaden undertone to his skin, a wintry slackness to the flesh of his cheeks, that spoke of an exhaustion that was as much spiritual as physical. Time had emptied this man of any strength he might once have had.

"I want you to meet Martin Carvajal, Lew," Lombroso said.

Carvajal rose and clasped my hand. His was cold. "A pleasure at last to encounter you, Mr. Nichols," he said in a mild, numb voice that came to me from the far side of the universe.

The odd courtly phrasing of his greeting was strange. I wondered what he was doing here. He looked so juiceless, so much like an applicant for some very minor bureaucratic job, or, more plausibly, like some down-at-the-heel uncle of Lombroso's here to pick up his monthly stipend.

But Carvajal was not the relict I took him to be. Already, in the moment of our handshake, he appeared to have an improbable access of strength; he stood taller, the lines of his face grew taut, a flush brightened his complexion. Only his eyes, bleak and lifeless, still betrayed some vital absence within.

Sententiously Lombroso said, "Mr. Carvajal was one of our most generous contributors to the mayor's campaign," giving me a suave Phoenician glance that told me, *Treat him kindly, Lew, we want more of his gold.*

That this drab seedy stranger should be a wealthy campaign benefactor, a person to be flattened and curried and admitted to the sanctum of a busy official, shook me profoundly, for rarely had I misread someone so thoroughly. But I managed a bland grin and said, "What business are you in, Mr. Carvajal?"

"Investments."

"One of the shrewdest and most successful private speculators I've ever known," Lombroso offered.

Carvajal nodded complacently.

"You earn your living entirely from the stock market?" I asked.

"Entirely."

"I didn't think anyone actually was able to do that."

"Oh, yes, yes, it can be done," Carvajal said. His tone was thin and husky, a murmur out of the tomb. "All it takes is a decent understanding of trends and a little courage. Haven't you ever been in the market, Mr. Nichols?"

"A little. Just dabbling."

"Did you do well?"

"Well enough. I have a decent understanding of trends myself. But I don't feel comfortable when

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the really wild fluctuations start to show up."

Just then a sweet-bell tinkled in Lombroso's inner office, which opened out of a short corridor to the left of his desk. I knew it meant the mayor was calling; the receptionist invariably relayed Quinn's calls to the back room when Lombroso had strangers out front. Lombroso excused himself and, with quick heavy strides that shook the carpeted floor, went to take the call. Finding myself alone with Carvajal was suddenly overwhelmingly disturbing; my skin tingled and there was pressure at my throat, as though some potent psychic emanation swept irresistibly from him to me. Excusing myself also, I hastily followed Lombroso to the other room, a narrow elbow-jointed cavern full of books from floor to ceiling. Lombroso, surprised and annoyed at my intrusion, angrily jabbed a finger toward his telephone screen, on which I could see the image of Mayor Quinn's head and shoulders. But instead of leaving I offered a pantomime of apology, a wild barrage of bobs and waves and shrugs and idiotic grimaces, that led Lombroso to ask the mayor to hold the line a moment. The screen went blank.

Lombroso glowered at me. "Well?" he demanded. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I don't know. I'm sorry. I couldn't stay in there. Who *is* he, Bob?"

"Just as I told you. Big money. Strong Quinn backer. We have to make nice for him. Look, I'm on the phone. The mayor has to know—"

"I don't want to be alone in there with him. He's like one of the walking dead. He gives me the creepies."

"What?"

"I'm serious. It's like some kind of cold deathly force coming from him, Bob. He makes me itch. He gives off scary vibes."

"He's a harmless little geezer who made a lot of money in the market and likes our man. that's *all.*"

"Why is he here?"

"To meet you," Lombroso said.

"Just that? Just to meet me?"

"He wanted very much to talk to you. Said it was important for him to get together with you."

"Is my time for sale to anybody who's ever given five bucks to Quinn's campaign fund?"

Lombroso sighed. "If I told you how much Carvajal gave, you wouldn't believe it, and in any case, yes, I think you might be able to spare some time for him."

"But—"

"Look, Lew, if you want more answers, you'll have to get them

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from Carvajal. Go on back to him, now. Be a sweetheart and let me talk to the mayor. Go on. Carvajal won't hurt you. He's just a little puny thing." Lombroso swung away from me and reactivated the phone.

I returned to Carvajal. He was sitting motionless, head bowed, arms limp, as if an icy blast had passed through the room while I was gone, leaving him parched and withered. Slowly, with obvious effort, he reconstituted himself, sitting up, filling his lungs, pretending to an animation that his eyes, his empty and frightening eyes, wholly betrayed. One of the walking dead, yes.

"Will you be joining us for lunch?" I asked him.

"No. No, I wouldn't impose. I wanted only a few words with you, Mr. Nichols."

"I'm at your service."

"Are you? How splendid." He smiled an ashen smile. "I've heard a good deal about you, you know. Even before you went into politics. In a way, we've both been in the same line of work."

"You mean the market?" I said, puzzled.

His smile grew brighter and more troubling. "Predictions," he said. "For me, the stock market. For you, consultant to business and politics. We've both lived by our wits and by our, ah, decent understanding of trends."

I was altogether unable to read him. He was opaque, a mystery, an enigma.

He said, "So now you stand at the mayor's elbow, telling him the shape of the road ahead. I admire people who have such closer vision. Tell me, what sort of career do you project for Mayor Quinn?"

"A splendid one," I said.

"A successful mayor, then."

"He'll be one of the finest this city's ever had."

Lombroso came back into the room. Carvajal said, "And afterward?"

I looked uncertainly at Lombroso, but his eyes were hooded.

"After his term as mayor?" I asked.

"Yes."

"He's still a young man, Mr. Carvajal. He might win three or four terms as mayor. I can't give you any sort of meaningful projection about events a dozen years from now."

"Twelve years in City Hall? Do you think he'll be content to stay there as long as that?"

Carvajal was playing with me. I felt I had been drawn unawares into some sort of duel. I gave him a long look and perceived something terrifying and indeterminable, something powerful and incomprehensible, that made me grasp the first available defensive move. I

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said, "What do *you* think?"

For the first time a flicker of life showed in his eyes. He was enjoying the game.

"That Mayor Quinn is headed for higher office," he said softly.

"Governor?"

"Higher."

I made no immediate answer, and then I was unable to answer, for an immense silence had seeped out of the leather-paneled walls to engulf us, and I feared being the one to puncture it. All was still, as becalmed as the air on a freezing night, until Lombroso rescued us by saying, "We think he has a lot of potential too."

"We have big plans for him," I blurted.

"I know," said Carvajal. "That's why I'm here. I want to offer my support."

Lombroso said, "Your financial aid has been tremendously helpful to us all along, and —"

"What I have in mind isn't only financial."

Now Lombroso looked to me for help. But I was lost, I said. "I don't think we're following you, Mr. Carvajal."

"If I could have a moment alone with you, then."

I glanced at Lombroso. If he was annoyed at being tossed out of his own office, he didn't show it. With characteristic grace he bowed and stepped into the back room. In a new tone, insinuating, confidential, Carvajal said to me, "As I remarked, you and I are in the same line of work. But I think our methods are rather different, Mr. Nichols. Your technique is intuitive and probabilistic, and mine — well, mine is different. I believe perhaps some of my insights might supplement yours, is what I'm trying to say."

"Predictive insights?"

"Exactly. I don't wish to intrude on your area of responsibility. But I might be able to make a suggestion or two that I think would be of value."

I winced. Suddenly the enigma lay unraveled and what was revealed within was anticlimactically commonplace. Carvajal was nothing but a rich political amateur who, figuring that his money qualified him as a universal expert, hungered to meddle in the doings of the pros. A hobbyist. An armchair politico. Jesus! Well, make nice for him, Lombroso had said. I would make nice. Groping for tact, I told him stiffly, "Of course. Mr. Quinn and his staff are always glad to hear helpful suggestions."

Carvajal's eyes searched for mine, but I avoided them. "Thank you," he whispered. "I've put down a few things to begin with."

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He offered me a folded slip of white paper. I took the slip without looking at it. Suddenly all strength seemed to go from him, as if he had come to the last of his resources. His face turned gray, his joints visibly loosened. "Thank you," he murmured again. "Thank you very much." And he was gone. Bowing himself out the door like a Japanese ambassador.

Shaking my head, I opened his slip of paper. Three things were written on it in a spidery handwriting:

1. Keep an eye on Gilmartin.

2. Mandatory national oil gellation — come out for it soon.

3. Socorro for Leydecker before summer. Get to him early.

I read them twice, got nothing from them, waited for the familiar clarifying leap of intuition, didn't get that either. Something about this Carvajal seemed to short my faculties completely. That ghostly smile, those burned-out eyes, these cryptic notations. I called to Lombroso, who emerged at once from his inner room.

"Well?"

"He gave me this," I said, and passed the slip to him.

"Gilmartin, Gellation. Leydecker." Lombroso frowned. "All right, wizard. What does it mean?"

Gilmartin had to be State Controller Anthony Gilmartin, who had clashed with Quinn a couple of times already over city fiscal policy but who hadn't been in the news in months. "Carvajal thinks there'll be more trouble with Albany about money," I hazarded. "You'd know more about that than I do, though. Is Gilmartin grumbling about city spending again?"

"Not a word."

"Are we preparing a batch of new taxes he won't like?"

"We would have told you by now if we were, Lew."

"So there are no potential conflicts shaping up between Quinn and the controller's office?"

"I don't see any in the visible future," Lombroso said. "Do you?"

"Nothing. As for mandatory oil gellation —"

"We *are* talking about pushing through a tough local law," he said. "No tankers entering New York Harbor carrying ungelled oil. Quinn isn't sure it's as good an idea as it sounds, and we were getting around to asking you for a projection. But national oil gellation? Quinn hasn't been speaking out much on matters of national policy."

"Not yet."

"Not yet, no. Maybe it's time. Maybe Carvajal is on to something there. And the third one —"

"Leydecker," I said. Ley-

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decker, surely, was Governor Richard Leydecker of California, one of the most powerful men in the New Democratic Party and the early front runner for the presidential nomination in 2000. "*Socorro* is Spanish for 'help,' isn't it, Bob? Help Leydecker, who doesn't need any help? Why? How can Paul Quinn help Leydecker, anyway? By endorsing him for President? Aside from winning Leydecker's good will, I don't see how that's going to do Quinn any good, and it isn't likely to give Leydecker anything he doesn't already have in his pocket, so —"

"Socorro is lieutenant governor of California," Lombroso said gently. "Carlos Socorro. It's a man's name, Lew."

"Carlos. Socorro." I closed my eyes. "Of course." My cheeks blazed. All my list making, all my frantic compiling of power centers in the New Democratic Party, and yet I had still managed to forget Leydecker's heir apparent. Not *socorro* but Socorro, idiot! I said, "What's he hinting at, then? That Leydecker will resign to seek the nomination, making Socorro governor? Okay, that computes. But get to him early? Get to whom?" I faltered. "Socorro? Leydecker? It comes out all muddy, Bob. I'm not getting a reading that makes any sense."

"What's Carvajal?"

"A crank," I said. "A rich crank. A weird little man with a bad case of politics on the brain." I put the note in my wallet. My head was throbbing. "Forget it. I humored him because you said I should humor him. I was a very good boy today, wasn't I, Bob? Now let's go to lunch and smoke some good bone and have some very shiny martinis and talk shop." Lombroso smiled his most radiant smile and patted my back consolingly and led me out of the office. I banished Carvajal from my mind. But I felt a chill, as though I had entered a new season and the season wasn't spring, and the chill lingered long after lunch was over.

12.

In the next few weeks we got down in earnest to the job of planning Paul Quinn's ascent — and our own — to the White House. I no longer had to be coy about my desire, bordering on need, to make him President; by now everyone in the inner circle openly admitted to the same fervor I had found so embarrassing when I first felt it a year and a half earlier.

The process of creating Presidents hasn't changed much since the middle of the nineteenth century, though the techniques are

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a bit different in these days of data nets, stochastic forecasts, and media-intensive ego-saturation. The starting point, of course, is a strong candidate, preferably one with a power base in a densely populated state. Your man has to be plausibly presidential; he must look and sound like a President. If that isn't his natural style, he'll have to be trained to create a sense of plausibility around himself. The best candidates have it naturally. McKinley, Lyndon Johnson, FDR, and Wilson all had that dramatic presidential look. So did Harding. No man ever looked more like a President than Harding; it was his only qualification for the job, but it was enough to get him there. Dewey, Al Smith, McGovern, and Humphrey didn't have it, and they lost. Stevenson and Willkie did, but they were up against men who had more of it. John F. Kennedy didn't conform to the 1960 ideal of what a President should look like — sage, paternal — but he had other things going for him, and by winning he altered the model to some degree, benefiting, among others, Paul Quinn. *Sounding* like a President is important too. The would-be candidate has to come across as firm and serious, yet charitable, with a tone communicating Lincoln's warmth and wisdom, Truman's spunk, FDR's serenity, JFK's wit.

The man who wants to be President must assemble a team — someone to raise money (Lombroso), someone to charm the media (Missakian), someone to analyze trends and suggest the most profitable policies (me), someone to put together a nationwide alliance of political chieftains (Ephrikian), someone to direct and coordinate strategy (Mardikian). The team then goes forth with the product, makes the proper connections in the worlds of politics, journalism, and finance, and establishes in the public's mind the concept that this is The Right Man For The Job. By the time of the nominating convention enough delegates have to be rounded up, via open or covert pledges, to put the candidate over on the first ballot or at worst the third; if you can't get him the nomination by then, alliances crumble and dark horses stalk the night.

Early in April '99 we held our first formal strategy meeting in Deputy Mayor Mardikian's office in the west wing of City Hall — Haig Mardikian, Bob Lombroso, George Missakian, Ara Ephrikian, and me. Quinn wasn't there; Quinn was in Washington, haggling with the Department of Health Education and Welfare for an increased appropriation for the city under the Emotional Stability Act. There was an electric crackle

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in the room that had nothing to do with the purifying system's output of ozone. It was the crackle of power, real and potential. We had gathered to begin the business of shaping history.

The table was round, but I felt myself occupying a place at the center of the group. The four of them, already far better versed in the ways of might and influence than I, were looking to me for direction, for the future was a mist, and they could only guess at the riddles of days undawned, and they believed I *saw*, I *knew*. I was not about to explain the difference between *seeing* and merely being good at guessing. I savored that sense of dominance. Power is addictive, oh, yes, at whatever level we may attain it. There I sat among the millionaires, two lawyers and a stockholder and a data-net tycoon, three swarthy Armenians and a swarthy Spanish Jew, each of them as hungry as I to feel the resonant triumph of a successful presidential bid, each as greedy as I for a share of vicarious glory, each already carving empires for himself within the government-to-come, and they waited for me to tell them how to go about what was in literal fact the conquest of the United States of America.

Mardikian said, "Let's begin with a reading, Lew. How do you rate Quinn's actual chances for getting the nomination next year?"

I made the appropriate seer-like pause; I looked as though I were grasping for the stochastic totems; I gazed into the vasty reaches of space, staring at dancing dust motes for auguries; I cloaked myself in vatic pomposity; I did the whole wicked impressive act; and after a moment I replied solemnly, "For the nomination, maybe one chance in eight. For election, one chance in fifty."

"Not so good."

"No."

"Not good at all," said Lombroso.

Mardikian, dismayed, tugging at the tip of his fleshy imperial nose, said, "Are you telling us we ought to skip it altogether? Is that your evaluation?"

"For next year, yes. Forget the presidency thing."

"Wait," Mardikian murmured. He faced me again. "What about running in '04, Lew?"

"Better. Much better."

Ephrikian, a burly, black-bearded man with a fashionably shaven scalp, looked bothered. He scowled and said, "The media is talking big right now about what Quinn has accomplished in his first year as mayor. I think this is the moment to grab for the next rung, Lew."

"I agree," I said amiably.

"But he'll be beaten in 2000?"

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"I say anybody the New Democrats put up will be beaten," I replied. "Anyone. Quinn, Leydecker, Keats, Kane, Pownell, anybody. This is the moment for Quinn to grab, all right, but the right next rung isn't necessarily the top one."

Missakian, squat, precise, thin-lipped, the communications expert, the man of clear vision, said, "Can you be more specific, Lew?"

"Fine," I said, and swung into it.

I set forth my not very chancy prediction that whoever went up against President Mortonson in 2000 — Leydecker, most likely — would get beaten. Incumbent Presidents in this country don't lose elections unless their first term has been a disaster of Hooverian proportions, and Mortonson had done a nice clean dull unexceptionable sluggish job. Leydecker would mount a respectable challenge, but there were really no issues, and he would be defeated and might be defeated badly. Best to stay out of Leydecker's path, then, I argued. Give him a free run. Any attempt by Quinn to wrest the nomination from him next year would probably fail, anyway, and would certainly make Leydecker Quinn's enemy, which wasn't desirable. Let Leydecker have the accolade, let him go on to destroy himself in the election trying to beat the invincible Mortonson. We would wait to put Quinn up — still young, untarnished by defeat — in 2004, when the Constitution prohibited Mortonson from running again.

"So Quinn comes out big for Leydecker in 2000 and then goes to sit on his hands?" Ephrikian asked.

"More than that," I said. I looked toward Bob Lombroso. He and I had already discussed strategy and come to an agreement, and now, hunching his powerful shoulders forward, sweeping the Armenian side of the table with an elegant heavy-lidded glance, Lombroso began to outline our plan.

Quinn would make an open bid for national prominence during the next few months, peaking in the early summer of '99 with a cross-country tour and major speeches in Memphis, Chicago, Denver, and San Francisco. With some solid attention-getting accomplishments in New York City behind him (enclave realignment, curriculum streamlining, de-Gottfriedizing of the police force, etc.) he would begin speaking out on larger issues like regional fusion-power interchange policy and reenactment of the repealed Privacy Laws of 1982 and — why not? — mandatory oil gellation. By

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autumn he would begin a direct attack on the Republicans, not so much Mortonson himself as selected cabinet members (especially Secretary of Energy Hospers, Secretary of Information Theiss, and Secretary of the Environment Perlman.) Thus he would inch into contention, becoming a national figure, a rising young leader. People would start talking about his presidential possibilities, though the polls would rank him well behind Leydecker as a favorite for the nomination — we'd see to that — and he would never actually declare himself in the running. He'd let the media assume he preferred Leydecker to any of the other declared candidates, though he would be careful not to make any outright endorsement of Leydecker. At the New Democratic convention in San Francisco in 2000, once Leydecker had been nominated and had made the traditional free-choice speech declining to name his running mate, Quinn would launch a game and dramatic but ultimately unsuccessful bid for the *vice*-presidential nomination. Why vice-presidential? Because the floor fight would give him major media exposure without opening him, as a presidential bid would, to accusations of premature ambition, and without angering the powerful Leydecker. Why unsuccessful? Because Leydecker was going to lose the election to Mortonson anyway, and there was nothing for Quinn to gain in going down to defeat with him as his running mate. Better to be turned aside at the convention — thereby establishing the image of a brilliant newcomer of great promise thwarted by political hacks — than to be repudiated at the polls. "Our model," Lombroso concluded, "is John F. Kennedy, edged out for vice president just this way in 1956, head of the ticket in 1960." Lew has run simulations showing the overlap of dynamics, one on one, and we can show you the profiles."

"Great," Ephrikian said. "When's the assassination due? 2003?"

"Let's keep it serious," said Lombroso gently.

"Okay," said Ephrikian. "I'll give you serious, then. What if Leydecker decides he'd like to run again in 2004?"

"He'll be 61 years old then," Lombroso replied, "and he'll have a previous defeat on his record. Quinn will be 43 and unbeaten. One man will be on the way down, the other obviously on the way up, and the party will be hungry for a winner after eight years out of power."

There was a long silence.

"I like it," Missakian announced finally.

"What about you, Haig?"

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Mardikian had not spoken for a while. Now he nodded. "Quinn's not ready to take over the country in 2000. He will be in 2004."

"And the country will be ready for Quinn," said Missakian.

13.

One thing about politics is that it makes strange bedfellows. But for politics, Sundara and I surely would never have wandered into an ad-hoc four-group that spring with Catalina Yarber, the Transit Creed proctor, and Lamont Friedman, the young financial genius. But for Catalina Yarber, Sundara might not have opted for Transit. But for Sundara's conversion, she would still be my wife. So, the threads of causation, everything leading back to the same point in time.

What happened is that as a member of Paul Quinn's entourage I received two free tickets to the $500-a-plate Nicholas Roswell Day dinner that the New York State New Democratic Party holds every year in April. This is not only a memorial tribute to the assassinated governor but also a fund-raising affair and a showcase for the party's current superstar. The main speaker this time was Quinn.

"It's time I went to one of your political dinners," Sundara said.

"They're pure formaldehyde."

"Nevertheless."

"You'll hate it, love."

"Are you going?" she asked.

"I have to."

"Then I think I'll use the other ticket. If I fall asleep, nudge me when the mayor gets up to talk. He turns me on."

So on a mild rainy night she and I podded out to the Harbor Hilton, that great pyramid all agleam on its pliable pontoon platform half a kilometer off Manhattan's tip, and foregathered with the cream of the eastern liberal establishment in the sparkling Summit Room, from which I had a view of — among other things — Sarkisian's condo tower on the other side of the bay where nearly four years earlier I had first met Paul Quinn. A good many alumni of that gaudy party would be at tonight's dinner. Sundara and I drew seats at the same table as two of them, Friedman and Ms. Yarber.

During the preliminary session of bone-doping and cocktails, Sundara drew more attention than any of the senators, governors, and mayors present, Quinn included. This was partly a matter of curiosity, since everybody in New York politics had heard about my exotic wife but few had met her, and partly because she was surely

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the most beautiful woman in the room. Sundara was neither surprised nor annoyed. She has been beautiful all her life, after all, and has had time to grow accustomed to the effects her looks evoke. Nor had she dressed like one who minds being stared at. She had chosen a sheer harem suit, dark and loose and flowing, that covered her body from toes to throat; beneath it she was bare, and when she passed before a source of light, she was devastating. She glowed like a radiant moth in the middle of the gigantic ballroom, supple and elegant, somber and mysterious, highlights sparkling in her ebon hair, hints of breast and flank tantalizing the onlookers. Oh, she was having a glorious time! Quinn came over to greet us, and he and Sundara transformed a chaste kiss-and-hug into an elaborate pas de deux of sexual charisma that made some of our elder statesmen gasp and redden and loosen their collars.

Sundara was still emanating pure *Kama Sutra* when we took our seats. Lamont Friedman, sitting halfway around the circular table from her, jerked and quivered when her eyes met his, and he stared at her with ferocious intensity while muscles twitched wildly in his long narrow neck. Meanwhile in a more restrained but no less intense way Friedman's companion of the evening, Ms. Yarber, was also giving Sundara the stare.

Friedman. He was about 29, weirdly thin, maybe 2.3 meters tall, with a bulging Adam's apple and crazy exophthalmic eyes; a dense mass of kinky brown hair engulfed his head like some woolly creature from another planet that was attacking him. He had come out of Harvard with a reputation for monetary sorcery and, going to Wall Street when he was 19, had become the head magus of a band of spaced-out financiers calling themselves Asgard Equities, which through a series of lightning coups — option pumping, feigned tenders, double straddles, and a lot of other techniques I but dimly comprehend — had within five years gained control of a billion-dollar corporate empire with extensive holdings on every continent but Antarctica. (And it would not amaze me to learn that Asgard held the customs-collection franchise for McMurdo Sound.)

Ms. Yarber was a small blonde person, 30 or so, lean and a trifle hard-faced, energetic, quick-eyed, thin-lipped. Her hair, boyishly short, fell in sparse bangs over her high inquisitive forehead. She wore not much face make-up, only a faint line of blue around her mouth, and her clothes were austere, a straw-colored jerkin and

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a straight, simple brown knee-length skirt. The effect was restrained and even ascetic, but, I had noticed as we sat down, she had neatly balanced her prevailingly asexual image with one stunning erotic touch: her skirt was entirely open from hip to hem for a span of perhaps twenty centimeters down the left side, exposing, as she moved, a sleek muscular leg, a smooth tawny thigh, a glimpse of buttock. At midthigh, fastened by an encircling chain, she wore the little abstract medallion of the Transit Creed.

And so to dinner. The usual banquet fare: fruit salad, consomme, protosoy filet, steam-table peas and carrots, flagons of California Burgundy, lumpy baked Alaska, everything served with maximum clatter and minimum grace by stony-faced members of down-trodden minority groups. As we chattered and ate, an assortment of small-time political pros circulated from table to table, slapping backs and gladding hands, and also we endured a procession of self-important political wives, mainly sixtyish, dumpy, and grotesquely garbed in the latest nippy-dip styles, wandering about digging their proximity to the mighty and famous. The noise level was 20 db up from Niagara. Geysers of ferocious laughter came splashing from this table or that as some silver-maned jurist or revered legislator told his or her favorite scabrous Republican/gay/BLACK / Puerto / Jew /Irish / Italian / doctor /lawyer / rabbi / priest/ female politican/Mafioso joke in the finest 1965 style. I felt, as I had always felt at these functions, like a visitor from Mongolia, hurled without phrase-book into some unknown American tribal ritual. It might have been unendurable if tubes of high-quality bone had not kept coming around; the New Democratic Party may stint on the wine but it knows how to buy dope.

By the time the speechmaking began, about half past nine, a ritual within the ritual was unfolding: Lamont Friedman was flashing almost desperate signals of desire at Sundara, and Catalina Yarber, though she was obviously also drawn to Sundara, had in a cool unemotional nonverbal way offered herself to me.

As the master of ceremonies — Lombroso, managing brilliantly to be elegant and coarse at the same time — went into the core of his routine, alternating derisive pokes at the most distinguished members of the party present in the room with obligatory threnodies to the traditional martyrs Roosevelt, Kennedy, Kennedy, King, Roswell, and Gottfried, Sundara leaned toward me and whispered, "'Have

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you been watching Friedman?"

"He has a bad case of horn, I'd say."

"I thought geniuses were supposed to be more subtle."

"Perhaps he thinks the least subtle approach is the most subtle approach," I suggested.

"Well, I think he's being adolescent."

"Too bad for him, then."

"Oh, no," Sundara said. "I find him attractive. Weird, but not repellent, you know? Almost fascinating."

"Then the direct approach is working for him. See? He *is* a genius."

Sundara laughed. "Yarber's after you. Is she a genius too?"

"I think it's really you she wants, love. It's called the indirect approach."

"What do you want to do?"

I shrugged. "It's up to you."

"I'm for it. How do you feel about Yarber?"

"Much energy there, is my guess."

"Mine too. Four-group tonight, then?"

"Why not," I said, just as Lombroso sent the audience into deafening merriment with an elaborately polyethnic-perverse climax to his introduction to Paul Quinn.

We gave the mayor a standing ovation, neatly choreographed by Haig Mardikian from the dais. Resuming my seat, I sent Catalina Yarber a body-language telegram that brought dots of color to her pale cheeks. She grinned. Small sharp even teeth, set close together. Message received. Done and done. Sundara and I would have an adventure with these two tonight, then. We were more monogamous than most couples, hence our two-group basic license: not for us the brawling multi-headed households, the squabbles over private property, the communal broods of kiddies. But monogamy is one thing and chastity is another, and if the former still exists, however metamorphosed by the evolutions of the era, the latter is one with the dodo and the trilobite. I welcomed the prospect of a passage-at-arms with the vigorous little Ms. Yarber. Yet I found myself envying Friedman, as I always envied Sundara's partner of the night, for he would have the unique Sundara, who was to me still the most desirable woman in the world, and I must settle for someone I desired but desired less than she. A measure of love, I suppose, is what that was, love within the context of exofidelity. Lucky Friedman! One can come to a woman like Sundara for the first time only once.

Quinn spoke. He is no comic, and he made only a few

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perfunctory jokes, to which his listeners tactfully overreacted; then it was down to serious business, the future of New York City, the future of the United States, the future of humanity in the coming century. The year 2000, he told us, holds immense symbolic value: it is literally the coming of the millennium. As the digit shifts, let us wipe clean the slate and begin afresh, remembering but not reenacting the errors of the past. We have, he said, been through the ordeal by fire in the twentieth century, enduring vast dislocations and transformations and injuries; we have several times come close to the destruction of all life on earth; we have confronted ourselves with the likelihood of universal famine and universal poverty; we have plunged ourselves foolishly and avoidably into decades of political instability; we have been the victims of our own greed, fear, hatred, and ignorance; but now, with the energy of the solar reaction itself in our control, with population growth stable, with a workable balance reached between economic expansion and protection of the environment, the time has come to build the ultimate society, a world in which reason prevails and right is triumphant, a world in which the full flowering of human potential can be realized.

And so on, a spendid vision of the era ahead. Noble rhetoric, especially from a Mayor of New York, traditionally more concerned with the problems of the school system and the agitations of the civil-service unions than with the destiny of mankind. It would have been easy to dismiss the speech as mere pretty bombast, but no, impossible, it held significance beyond its theme, for what we were hearing was the first trumpet call of a would-be world leader. There he stood, looking half a meter taller than he was, face flushed, eyes bright, arms folded in that characteristic pose of force in repose, hitting us with those clarion phrases —

"— as the digit shifts, let us wipe clean the slate —"

"— we have been through the ordeal by fire —"

"— the time has come to build the ultimate society —"

The Ultimate Society. I heard the click and the whirr, and the sound was not so much the shifting of the digit as the extrusion of a new political slogan, and I didn't need great stochastic gifts to guess that we would all hear much, much more about The Ultimate Society before Paul Quinn was done with us.

Damn, but he was compelling! I was eager to be off and into the night's exploits, and still I sat

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motionless, rapt, and so did this whole audience of boozy pols and stoned celebrities, and even the waiters halted their eternal clashing of trays as Quinn's magnificent voice rolled through the hall. Since that first night at Sarkisian's I had watched him grow steadily stronger, more solid, as though his rise to prominence had confirmed in him his own self-appraisal and burned away whatever shred of diffidence was in him. Now, glittering in the spotlights, he seemed a vehicle for cosmic energies; there played through him and out from him an irresistible power that shook me profoundly. A new Roosevelt? A new Kennedy? I trembled. A new Charlemagne, a new Mohammed, maybe a new Genghis Khan.

He finished with a flourish, and we were up and screaming, no need of Mardikian's choreography now, and the media folk were running to claim their cassettes, and the hard-eyed clubhouse boys were slapping palms and talking about the White House, and women were weeping, and Quinn, sweating, arms outspread, accepted our homage with quiet satisfaction, and I sensed the first rumblings of the juggernaut through these United States.

It was an hour more before Sundara and Friedman and Catalina and I got out of the hotel. To the pod, quickly home. Odd selfconscious silences; all four of us eager to get to it, but the social conventions temporarily prevail, and we pretend to coolness; and, besides, Quinn has overwhelmed us. We are so full of him, his resonant phrases, his vital presence, that we are all four of us made ciphers, numb, selfless, stunned. No one can initiate the first move. We chatter. Brandy, bone; a tour of the apartment; Sundara and I show off our paintings, our sculptures, our primitive artifacts, our view of the Brooklyn skyline; we become less ill at ease with one another, but still there is no sexual tension; that mood of erotic anticipation that had been building so excitingly three hours earlier has been wholly dissipated by the impact of Quinn's speech. Was Hitler an orgasmic experience? Was Caesar? We sprawl on the thick white carpet. More brandy. More bone. Quinn, Quinn, Quinn: instead of sexing we talk politics. Friedman, finally, most unspontaneously, slides his hand along Sundara's ankle and up over her calf. It is a signal. We will force the intensity. "He *has* to run next year," says Catalina Yarber, ostentatiously maneuvering herself so that the slit in her skirt flops open, displaying flat belly, golden curls. "Leydecker's got the nomination

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wrapped up,". Friedman opines, growing bolder, caressing Sundara's breasts. I touched the dimmer switch, kicking in the altered-light rheostat, and the room takes on a shining psychedelic texture. About, about, in reel and rout, the witchfires dance. Yarber offers a fresh tube of bone. "From Sikkim," she declares. "The best stuff going." To Friedman she says, "I know Leydecker's ahead, but Quinn can push him aside if he tries. We can't wait four more years for him." I draw deep on the tube, and the Sikkimese dope sets up a breeder reaction in my brain. "Next year is too soon," I tell them. "Quinn looked incredible tonight, but we don't have enough time to hit the whole country with him between here and a year from November. Mortonson's a cinch for re-election anyway. Let Leydecker use himself up next year, and we move Quinn into position in '04." I would have gone on to outline the whole feigned - vice - presidential - bid strategy, but Sundara and Friedman had vanished into the shadows, and Catalina was no longer interested in politics.

Our clothes fell away. Her body was trim, athletic, boyishly smooth and muscular, breasts heavier than I had expected, hips narrower. She kept her Transit Creed emblem chained to her thigh. Her eyes gleamed, but her skin was cool and dry and her nipples weren't erect; whatever she might be feeling, it didn't currently include strong physical desire for Lew Nichols. What I felt for her was curiosity and a certain remote willingness to fornicate; no doubt she felt no more for me. We entangled our bodies, stroked each other's skins, made our mouths meet and our tongues tickle. It was such an impersonal thing that I was afraid I'd never get it up, but the familiar reflexes took hold, the old reliable hydraulic mechanisms began shunting blood toward my loins, and I felt the proper throb, the proper stiffening. "Come," she said, "be born to me now." A strange phrase. Transit stuff, I learned later. I hovered above her and her slim strong thighs gripped me and I went into her.

Our bodies moved, up and down, back and forth. We rolled into this position and that one, joylessly running through the standard repertoire. Her skills were formidable, but there was a contagious chilliness about her manner of doing it that rendered me a mere screwing machine, a restless piston endlessly ramming a cylinder, so that I copulated without pleasure and almost without sensation. What could she be getting out of it? Not much, I supposed. It's because she's really

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after Sundara, I thought, and is putting up with me merely to get a chance at *her*. I was right but I was wrong, for, I would learn eventually, Ms. Yarber's steely passionless technique was not so much a reflection of a lack of interest in me as it was a result of Transit teaching. Sexuality, say the good proctors, traps one in the here and now and delays transitions, and transition is all: the steady state is death. Therefore, engage in coition if you must, or if there is some greater goal to be gained by it, but be not dissolved by ecstasy lest you mire yourself wrongfully in the intransitive condition.

Even so. We indulged in our icy ballet for what seemed like weeks, and then she came, or allowed herself to come, in a quiet quick quiver, and with silent relief I nudged myself across the boundary into completion, and we rolled apart, hardly breathing hard.

"I'd like more brandy," she said after a bit.

I reached for the cognac. From far away came the groans and gasps of more orthodox pleasure: Sundara and Friedman going at it.

Catalina said, "You're very competent."

"Thank you," I replied uncertainly. No one had ever said quite that to me before. I wondered how to respond and decided to make no attempt at reciprocity. Cognac for two. She sat up, crossed her legs, smoothed her hair, sipped her drink. She looked unsweaty, unruffled, unfucked, in fact. Yet, strangely, she glowed with sexual energy; she seemed genuinely pleased with what we had done and genuinely pleased, as well, with me. "I mean that," she said. "You're superb. You do it with power and detachment."

"Detachment?"

"Nonattachment, I should say. We value that. In Transit, nonattachment is what we seek. All Transit processes work toward creating flux, toward constant evolutionary change, and if we allow ourselves to become attached to any aspect of the here and now, to become attached to erotic pleasure, for example, to become attached to getting rich, to become attached to any ego aspect that ties us to intransient states —"

"Catalina —"

"Yes?"

"I'm very looped. I can't handle theology now."

She grinned. "To become attached to nonattachment," she said, "is one of the worst follies of all. I'll have mercy. No more Transit talk."

"I'm grateful."

"Some other time, perhaps? You and Sundara both. I'd love to explain our teachings, if —"

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"Of course," I said. "Not now."

We drank, we smoked, eventually we found ourselves fornicating again — it was my defense against her yearning to convert me — and this time she must have had her tenets less firmly to the fore of her consciousness, for our interchange was less of a copulation, more a making of love. Toward dawn Sundara and Friedman appeared, she looking sleek and glorious, he bony and drained and even a bit dazed. She kissed me across a gulf of twelve meters, a pucker of air: hello, love, hello, I love you most of all. I went to her and she pressed tight against me and I nibbled her earlobe and said, "Have fun?" She nodded dreamily. Friedman must have his skills too, not all of them financial. "Did he talk Transit to you?" I wanted to know. Sundara shook her head. Friedman wasn't into Transit yet, she murmured, though Catalina had been working on him.

"She's working on me too," I said.

Friedman was slumped on the couch, glassy-eyed, staring dully at the sunrise over Brooklyn. Sundara, steeped in classical Hindu erotology, was a heavy trip for any man.

— when a woman clasps her lover as closely as a serpent twines around a tree, and pulls his head towards her waiting lips, if she then kisses him making a light hissing sound 'soutt soutt' and looks at him long and tenderly — her pupils dilated with desire — this posture is known as the Clasp of the Serpent —

"Anyone for breakfast?" I asked.

Catalina smiled obliquely. Sundara merely inclined her head. Friedman looked unenthusiastic. "Later," he said, voice barely rising above a whisper. A burned-out husk of a man.

I left them sprawled in their various parts of the living room and went off to shower. I had had no sleep, but my mind was alert and active. A strange night, a busy night: I felt more alive than in weeks, and I sensed a stochastic tickle, a tremor of clairvoyance, that warned me I was moving to the threshold of some new transformation. I took the shower full force, punching for maximum vibratory enhancement, waves of ultrasound keying into my throbbing outreaching nervous system, and emerged looking for new worlds to conquer.

No one was in the living room but Friedman, still naked, still glazed of eye, still supine on the couch.

"Where'd they go?" I asked.

Languidly he waved a finger toward the master bedroom. So

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Catalina had scored her goal after all.

Was I expected to extend similar hospitality to Friedman now? My bisexuality quotient is low, and he inspired not a shred of gaiety in me just then. But, no, Sundara had dismantled his libido; he flashed no signs except exhaustion. "You're a lucky man," he murmured after a while. "What a marvelous woman .... What ... a ... marvelous ..." I thought he had dozed. "... woman. Is she for sale?"

"Sale?"

He sounded almost serious.

"Your Oriental salve girl is who I'm talking about."

"My wife?"

"You bought her in the market in Baghdad. Five hundred dinars for her, Nichols."

"No deal."

"A thousand."

"Not for two empires," I said.

He laughed. "Where'd you find her?"

"California."

"Are there any more like that out there?"

"She's unique," I told him. "So am I, so are you, so is Catalina. People don't come in standard models, Friedman. Are you interested in breakfast yet?"

He yawned. "If we want to be reborn on the proper level, we must learn to purify oursevles of the needs of the meat. That's Transit. I'll mortify my meat by renouncing breakfast as a start." His eyes closed and he went away.

I had breakfast alone and watched morning come rushing out of the Atlantic at us and took the morning *Times* out of its door slot and was pleased to see that Quinn's speech had made the front page, below the fold but with a two column photo. MAYOR CALLS FOR FULL HUMAN POTENTIAL. That was the headline, a bit below the *Times'* usual standard of incisiveness. The story used his Ultimate Society tag as its lead and quoted half a dozen glittering phrases in the first twenty lines. The story then jumped to page 21, and the complete text was in a box accompanying the jump. I found myself reading it, and as I read I found myself wondering why I had been so stirred, for the printed speech seemed to lack any real content; it was purely a verbal object, a collection of catchy lines, offering no program, making no concrete suggestions. And to me last night it had sounded like a blueprint for Utopia. I shivered. Quinn had provided nothing more than an armature; I myself had hung the trimmings on, all my vague fantasies of social reform and millennial transformation. Quinn's performance had been

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pure charisma in action, an elemental force working us over from the dais. So it is with all the great leaders: the commodity they have to sell is personality. Mere ideas can be left to lesser men.

The phone began ringing a little after eight. Mardikian wanted to distribute a thousand videotapes of the speech to New Democratic organizations all over the country; what did I think? Lombroso reported pledges of half a million to the as-yet-nonexistent Quinn-for-President campaign kitty in the aftermath of the speech. Missakian ... Ephrikian ... Sarkisian...

When I finally had a quiet moment, I came out and found Catalina Yarber, wearing her blouse and her thigh chain, prodding Lamont Friedman into wakefulness. She gave me a foxy grin. "We'll be seeing more of each other, I know," she said throatily.

They left. Sundara slept on. There were more phone calls. Quinn's speech was making waves everywhere. Eventually she emerged, naked, delicous, sleepy but perfect in her beauty, not even puffy-eyed.

"I think I want to know more about Transit," she said.

14.

Three days later I came home and was startled to find Sundara and Catalina, both nude, kneeling side by side on the living room carpet. How beautiful they looked, the pale body beside the chocolate one, the short yellow hair and the long black cascade, the dark nipples and the pink. The air was rich with incense and they were running through litanies. "Everything passes," Yarber intoned, and Sundara repeated, "Everything passes." A golden chain constricted the dusky satin of my wife's left thigh, and the Transit Creed medallion was mounted on it.

She and Catalina displayed a courteous don't-mind-us attitude toward me and went on with what they were doing, which evidently was an extended catechism. I thought they would rise at some point and disappear into the bedroom, but, no, the nudity was purely ritual, and when they were done with the teachings, they donned their clothes and brewed tea and gossiped like old friends. That night, when I reached for Sundara, she said gently that she couldn't make love just now. Not *wouldn't*, not *didn't want to*, but *couldn't*. As if she had entered into a state of purity that must not at the moment be defiled by lust.

So it began, Sundara's passage into Transit. At first there was only the morning meditation, ten minutes in silence; then there were

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the evening readings, out of mysterious paperbound books poorly printed on cheap paper; in the second week she announced there would be a meeting in the city every Tuesday night, and could I manage without her? Tuesdays became nights of sexual abstinence for us also; she was apologetic but firm about that. She seemed distant, preoccupied, engrossed with her conversion. Even her work, the art gallery she ran so shrewdly, seemed unimportant to her. I suspected she was seeing Catalina often in the city during the day, and I was right, though in my naive Western-materialist way I imagined they were merely having a love affair, meeting in hotel rooms for interludes of slippery grapplings and tonguings, when in fact it was Sundara's soul far more than her body that had been seduced. Old friends had warned me long ago: marry a Hindu and you'll be twirling prayer wheels with her from dusk to dawn, you'll turn into a vegetarian, she'll have you singing hymns to Krishna. I laughed at them. Sundara was American, Western, earthy. But now I saw her Sanskrit genes taking their revenge.

Transit, of course, wasn't Hindu — more a mixture of Buddhism and fascism, actually, a stew of Zen and Tantra and Platonism and gestalt therapy and Poundian economics and what-all else, and neither Krishna nor Allah nor Jehovah nor any other divinity figured in its beliefs. It had come out of California, naturally, six or seven years ago, and, diligently proselytized by an ever-expanding horde of dedicated proctors, it had spread rapidly through such less enlightened places as the eastern United States.

Catalina Yarber had been able to express most of the basic tenets in five minutes, the night she and I bedded. This world is unimportant, the Transit folk assert, and our passage through it is brief, a quick trifling trip. We go through, we are reborn into it, we go through again, we keep on going through until at last we are freed from the wheel of karma and pass onward to the blissful annihilation that is nirvana, when we become one with the cosmos. What holds us to the wheel is ego attachment: we become hooked on things and needs and pleasures, on self-gratification, and so long as we retain a self that requires gratification, we will be born again and again into this dreary meaningless little mud ball. If we want to move to a higher plane and ultimately to reach the Highest, we must refine our souls in the crucible of renunciation.

All that is fairly orthodox

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Eastern theology. The special kicker of Transit is its emphasis on volatility and mutability. Transition is all; change is essential; stasis kills; rigid consistency is the road to undesirable rebirths. Transit processes work toward constant evolution, toward perpetual quicksilver flow of the spirit, and encourage unpredictable, even eccentric, behavior. That's the appeal: the sanctification of craziness. The universe, the proctors say, is in perpetual flux; we never can step twice into the same river; we must flow and yield, we must be supple, protean, kaleidoscopic, mercurial, we must accept the knowledge that permanence is an ugly delusion and everything, ourselves included, is in a state of giddy unending transition. But although the universe is fluid and wayward, we are not therefore condemned to blow haphazardly in its breezes. No, they tell us: *because* nothing is deterministic, *because* nothing is unbendingly foreordained, everything is within our individual control. We are the existential shapers of our destinies, and we are free to grasp the Truth and act on it. What is the Truth? That we must freely choose not to be ourselves, that we must discard our rigidly conceived self-images, for only through the unimpeded flow of the Transit processes can we abolish the ego attachments that tie us to intransient low-plane states.

These teachings were threatening to me. I am not comfortable with chaos. I believe in order and predictability. My gift of second sight, my innate stochasticity, is founded on the notion that patterns exist, that probabilities are real. I prefer to believe that while it is not certain that tea over a flame will boil or that a rock thrown in the air will fall, these events are highly likely. The Transit people, it seemed to me, were striving toward abolition of that likelihood: to produce iced tea on a stove was their aim.

Coming home was an adventure now.

One day the furniture was rearranged. *Everything.* All our carefully calculated effects were destroyed. Three days later I found the furniture in yet another pattern, even more clumsy. I made no comment either time, and after about a week Sundara put things back the way they had been at first.

Sundara dyed her hair red. The effect was ghastly.

She kept a white cross-eyed cat for six days.

She begged me to accompany her to a Tuesday night process session, but when I agreed she canceled my appointment an hour before we were due to set out, and

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went alone, explaining nothing.

She was in the hands of the apostles of chaos. Love breeds patience; therefore I was patient with her. Whatever way she chose to wage her war on stasis, I was patient. This is only a phase, I told myself. Only a phase.

15.

On the 9th of May, 1999, between the hours of four and five in the morning, I dreamed that State Controller Gilmartin was being executed by a firing squad.

I can be so precise about the date and the time because it was a dream so vivid, so much like the eleven o'clock news unreeling on the screen of my mind, that it awakened me, and I mumbled a memo about it into my bedside recorder. I learned long ago to make notes on dreams of such intensity, because they often turn out to be premonitions. In dreams comes truth. Joseph's Pharaoh dreamed he stood by a river out of which came seven plump cattle and seven scrawny ones, fourteen omens. Calpurnia saw the statue of her husband Caesar spouting blood, the night before the Ides of March. Abe Lincoln dreamed of hearing the subdued sobs of invisible mourners, and beheld himself going downstairs to find a catafalque in the East Room of the White House, an honor guard of soldiers, a body in funeral vestments on the bier, a throng of weeping citizens. "Who is dead in the White House?" the dreaming President asks, and they tell him that the dead man is the President, slain by an assassin. Long before Carvajal entered my life I knew that the future's moorings are weak, that floes of time break loose and drift back across the great sea to our sleeping minds.

I saw Gilmartin, plump, pale, sweating, a tall round-faced man with cold blue eyes, hauled into a bare dusty courtyard, a place of fierce sunlight and harsh sharp shadows. I saw him struggling at his bonds, snuffling, twisting, beseeching, protesting his innocence. The soldiers standing shoulder by shoulder, lifting their rifles, an infinitely long moment of silent aiming. Gilmartin moaning, praying, whining, at the very end finding a scrap of dignity, pulling himself erect, squaring his shoulders. The order of fire, the crack of guns, the body jerking and writhing hideously, slumping against the ropes ....

Now what to make of this? The promise of trouble for Gilmartin who had made financial troubles for the Quinn administration and whom I didn't like, or merely the hope of it? An assassination brewing, perhaps? Assassinations

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had been a big thing in the early '90's, bigger even than in the bloody Kennedy years, but I thought the fad had gone out of fashion again. Who would assassinate a drab hack like Gilmartin, anyway? Maybe what I was picking up was a premonition that Gilmartin would die of natural causes. Gilmartin boasted of his good health, though. An accident, then? Or maybe just metaphorical death — a lawsuit, a political squabble, a scandal, an impeachment?

I didn't know how to interpret my dream or what to do about it, and ultimately I decided not to do anything. And so we missed the boat on the Gilmartin scandal, which indeed was what I was perceiving, no firing squad for the controller, but shame, resignation, jail. Quinn could have made tremendous political capital out of it, if it had been city investigators who exposed Gilmartin's manipulations, if the mayor had risen in righteous wrath to say that the city was being shortchanged and an audit was needed. But I failed to see the larger pattern, and it was a state accountant, not one of our people, who eventually blew the story open — how Gilmartin had been systematically diverting millions of dollars of state funds intended for New York City into the treasuries of a few small upstate towns, and thence into his own pockets and those of a couple of rural officials. Too late I realized that I had had *two* chances at knocking Gilmartin down, and I had fumbled both of them. A month before my dream Carvajal had given me that mysterious note. Keep an eye on Gilmartin, he had suggested. Gilmartin, oil gellation, Leydecker. Well?

"Talk to me about Carvajal," I said to Lombroso.

"What do you want to know?"

"How well has he actually done in the market?"

"So well it's uncanny. He's cleared nine or ten million that I know of, just since '93. Maybe a lot more. I'm sure he works through several brokerage firms. Numbered accounts, dummy nominees, all sorts of tricks to hide how much he's really been taking out of the Street."

"He earns all of it from trading?"

"All of it. He gets in, rides a stock straight up, gets out."

"Is it possible," I asked, "for anybody to outguess the market that consistently over so many years?"

Lombroso shrugged. "I suppose a few people have done it. Nobody I know has been as consistent as Carvajal."

"Does he have inside information?"

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"He can't have. Not on so many different companies. It has to be pure intuition. He just buys and sells, buys and sells, and reaps his profits. Came in cold, one day, opened an account, no bank references, no Wall Street connections. Spooky."

"Yes," I said.

"Quiet little man. Sat watching the tape, put in his orders. No fuss, no chatter, no excitement."

"Is he ever wrong?"

"He's taken some losses, yes. Small ones."

"I wonder why."

"Why what?" Lombroso asked.

"Why any losses at all?"

"Even Carvajal has to be fallible."

"Really?" I said. "Maybe he takes the losses for strategic effect. Calculated setbacks, to encourage people to believe he's human. Or to keep others from automatically backing his picks and distorting the fluctuations."

"Don't you think he's human, Lew?"

"I think he's human, yes."

"But —?"

"But with a very special gift."

"For picking stocks that are going to go up. Very special."

"More than that."

"More how?"

"I'm not ready to say."

"Why are you afraid of him, Lew?" Lombroso said.

"Did I say I was? When?"

"The day he came here, you told me he made you feel creepy, that he gives off scary vibes. Remember?"

"I suppose I did."

"You think he's practicing witchcraft? You think he's some kind of magician?"

"I know probability theory, Bob. If there's one thing I do know, it's probability theory. Carvajal's done a couple of things that go beyond normal probability curves. One is his stock-market performance. Another is this Gilmartin thing."

"Perhaps Carvajal gets his newspapers delivered a month in advance," Lombroso said.

He laughed. I didn't.

I said, "I have no hypotheses at all. I only know that Carvajal and I operate in the same kind of business and that he's so much better at it than I am that there's no comparison. What I tell you now is that I'm baffled and a little frightened."

Lombroso, calm to the point of seeming patronizing, drifted easily across his majestic office and stared a moment into his showcase of medieval treasures. At length he said, speaking with his back turned, "You're being excessively melodramatic, Lew. The world is full of people who frequently make lucky guesses. You're one your-

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self. He's luckier than most, sure but that doesn't mean he can see the future."

"All right, Bob."

"Does it? When you come to me and say the probability of an unfavorable public response to this or that piece of legislation is thus-and-such, are you seeing into the future, or just taking a guess? I never heard you claim clairvoyance, Lew. And Carvajal —"

"All right!"

"Easy, man."

"I'm sorry."

"Can I get you a drink?"

"I'd like to change the subject," I said.

"What would you like to talk about next?"

"Oil gellation policy."

He nodded blandly.

"The City Council," he said, "has had a bill in committee all spring that calls for gellation of all oil aboard tankers coming into New York Harbor. Environmentalists are for it, naturally, and, naturally, the oil companies are against it. Consumer groups aren't too happy about it because the bill is bound to push up refining costs, which means retail price increases. And —"

"Don't tankers carry gelling equipment already?"

"They do, yes. Been a federal regulation since, oh, '83 or so. The year they first began the heavy offshore pumping in the Atlantic. Whenever a tanker has an accident that causes structural rupture and there's a chance of an oil spill, a nozzle system sprays all the crude in the damaged section with gelling agents that turn the oil into a solid glob, right? Which keeps the oil inside the tank, and even if the ship breaks up altogether, the gelled oil floats in big chunks that can easily be scooped up. Then they simply have to heat the gel to — what is it, 130° Fahrenheit? — and it turns back into oil. But it takes three or four hours just to spray the stuff into one of those huge tanks, and another seven or eight for the oil to gel; so we have a period of maybe twelve hours following the onset of gellation in which the oil is still fluid, and a lot of oil can escape in twelve hours. So City Councilman Ladrone has this plan requiring oil to be gelled as a routine step in transporting it by sea to refineries, not just as an emergency response in case a tanker cracks open. But the political problems are —"

"Do it," I said.

"I have a stack of pro-and-con position papers that I'd like —"

"Forgot them. Do it. Get that bill out of committee and into law this week. Effective, say, June 1. Let the oil companies scream. Have the bill enacted and have Quinn sign it with a visible flourish."

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"The big problem," Lombroso said, "is that if New York enacts a law like that and the other Eastern Seaboard cities don't, then New York will simply cease to serve as a port of entry for crude oil heading toward metropolitan-area refineries, and the revenue that we lose will be —"

"Don't worry about it. Pioneers have to take a few risks. Get the bill rammed through, and when Quinn signs it, have him call upon President Mortonson to put a similar bill before Congress. Let Quinn stress that New York City is going to protect its beaches and harbors no matter what, but that he hopes the rest of the country won't be too far behind. Got it?"

"Aren't you pushing ahead too fast with this, Lew?"

"Maybe I can see the future too," I said.

I laughed. He didn't.

Bothered as he was by my insistence on haste, Lombroso did the needful. We conferred with Mardikian; Mardikian spoke with Quinn; Quinn passed the word to the City Council, and the bill became law. The day Quinn was due to sign it, a delegation of oil-company lawyers showed up at his office to threaten, in their politely oily way, a harrowing court fight if he didn't veto the measure. Quinn sent for me and we had a two-minute discussion. "Do I really want this law?" he asked, and I said, "You really do," and he sent the oil lawyers away. At the signing he delivered an impromtu and impassioned ten-minute speech in favor of national mandatory gellation. It was a slow day for the networks, and the heart of Quinn's speech, a lively two-and-a-half minute segment about the rape of the environment and man's determination not to acquiesce passively, made it into the night's news programs from coast to coast.

The timing was perfect. Two days later the Japanese supertanker *Exxon Maru* was rammed off California and broke apart in a really spectacular way; the gelling system malfunctioned, and millions of barrels of crude oil fouled the shoreline from Mendocino to Big Sur. That evening a Venezuelan tanker heading for Port Arthur, Texas, experienced some mysterious calamity in the Gulf of Mexico that spilled a load of ungelled oil on the shores of the whooping crane wildlife refuge near Corpus Christi. The next day there was a bad spill somewhere off Alaska; and, just as though these three awful spills were the first the world had ever known, suddenly everybody in Congress was deploring pollution and talking about mandatory gellation — with Paul Quinn's brand-new New York City legislation fre-

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quently being mentioned as the prototype for the proposed federal law.

Gilmartin.

Gellation.

One tip remained: *Socorro for Leydecker before summer. Get to him early.*

Cryptic and opaque, like most oracular pronouncements. I was entirely stopped by it. No stochastic technique at my command yielded a useful projection. I doodled a dozen scenarios and they all came out bewildering and meaningless. What kind of professional prophet was I, when I was handed three solid clues to future events and I could turn a trick on but one out of the three?

I began to think I ought to pay a call on Carvajal.

Before I could do anything, though, stunning news rolled out of the west. Richard Leydecker, Governor of California, titular leader of the New Democratic Party, front-running candidate for the next presidential nomination, dropped dead on a Palm Springs golf course on Memorial Day at the age of 57, and his office and power descended to Lieutenant Governor Carlos Socorro, who thereby became a mighty political force in the land by virtue of his control of the country's wealthiest and most influential state.

Socorro, who now would command the huge California delegation at next year's national New Democratic convention, began making king-making noises at his very first press conferences, two days after Leydecker's death. He managed to suggest, apropos of practically nothing, that he regarded Senator Eli Kane of Illinois as the most promising choice for next year's New Democratic nomination — thereby setting instantly into motion a Kane-for-President boom that would become overwhelming in the next few weeks.

I had been thinking about Kane myself. When the news of Leydecker's death came in, my immediate calculation was that Quinn should now make a play for the top nomination instead of the vice-presidency — why not grab the extra publicity, now that we no longer needed to fear a murderous struggle with Leydecker? — but that we still should contrive things so that Quinn lost out on the convention floor to some older and less glamorous man, who then would go on to be trounced by President Mortonson in November. Quinn thus would inherit the fragments of the party to rebuild for 2004. Somebody like Kane, a distinguished-looking but hollow party-line politician, would be an ideal man for the role of the villain who deprives the dashing young

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mayor of the nomination.

For Quinn to move into serious contention against Kane, though, we would need Socorro's support. Quinn was still an obscure figure to much of the country, and Kane was famous and beloved in the vast mid-American heartland. Backing from California would enable him to make a decent losing fight against Kane. I figured that we would let a tasteful interval go by, perhaps a week, and then start making overtures to Governor Socorro. But Socorro's instant endorsement of Kane changed everything overnight and undercut Quinn completely. Suddenly there was Senator Kane touring California at the side of the new governor and emitting orotund bleats of praise for Socorro's administrative skills.

The fix was in and Quinn was out. A Kane-Socorro ticket was obviously in the making, and they would steamroller into next year's convention with a first-ballot nomination locked up. Quinn would merely look quixotic and ingenuous, or, worse, disingenuous, if he tried to mount a floor fight. We had failed to get to Socorro in time, despite Carvajal's tip, and Quinn had lost a chance to acquire a potent ally. No fatal damage had been done to Quinn's 2004 presidential chances, but our tardiness had been costly all the same.

Oh, the chagrin, the shame, the obloquy! Here, says the strange little man, here is a piece of paper with three pieces of the future written on it. Take such action as your own prophetic skills tell you is desirable. Fine, you say, thanks a million, and your skills tell you nothing, and nothing is what you do. And the future slides down around your ears to become the present, and you see quite clearly the things you should have done, and you look foolish in your own eyes.

I felt humble. I felt worthless.

I felt that I had failed some sort of test.

I needed guidance. I went to Carvajal.

(*to be continued next month*)

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It's important to kill mosquitoes, especially malaria-carrying ones. *Cliffs Notes* may be refreshing to masochists in search of a new intellectual thrill, but every teacher of Frosh Comp will find this volume wearisomely familiar; it is the ultimate bad paper that drives us all stark, staring bonkers: the compulsive (usually polysyllabic) hedging, the endless plot summaries (redundant if you've read the book, baffling if you haven't), the blank ignorance of anything more than two years old (the "tremendous effect" of *Dune* on the young is mentioned as being without parallel; sic transit gloria *Stranger*), the cumulatively unsettling inaccuracies, the eerie sloppiness (based on an intense, unspoken belief that words don't really mean anything), and worst of all — because ignorant, desperate, or hurried students are particularly vulnerable — the assumption that fiction is put together assembly-line fashion, out of detachable pieces (except for titles, all italics in the following quotes are mine):

...rite of passage ... the sociology of a closed society .... the politics of power ... *are brought together smoothly* and successfully. (93)

...there are six factors which *compose* a literary work ... which can be

JOANNA RUSS

Books

Cliffs Notes: Science Fiction, An Introduction, by L. David Allen, Cliffs Notes, Inc., Lincoln, Nebraska, $1.95

Political Science Fiction: An Introductory Reader, eds. Martin Harry Greenberg, Patricia S. Warrick, Prentice-Hall, Inc., $5.95 (cloth $9.95)

As Tomorrow Becomes Today, ed. Charles Wm. Sullivan, III, Prentice-Hall, Inc., $4.95 (cloth $7.95)

Speculations: An Introduction to Literature Through Fantasy and Science Fiction, ed. Thomas E. Sanders, Glencoe Press, Beverly Hills, California, $6.95

Modern Science Fiction, ed. Norman Spinrad, Anchor Press, New York, $3.50

Science Fiction: The Classroom in Orbit, by Beverly Friend, Educational Impact, Inc., Glassboro, N.J., 1974 $3.75 ($3.00 for 20 or more)

The English Assassin, by Michael Moorecock, Harper & Row, $6.95

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separated *rather easily* for analysis: character, story, plot, narrative point-of-view, setting, and language. (133) ["language" is given short shrift here and elsewhere, as you may infer from the misuse of "compose"]

[*Left Hand of Darkness* provides] the first "contact" [sic] theme handled differently and well ... an excellent adventure ... the world and its people. Accomplishing *any one of these well* would deserve praise; to do *three of them well* should insure the author of a permanent place ... (101-2)

A good example of hedging:

[Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*] *seems* to have introduced *many* readers to a new *kind of* world, one which *most of them* would have had *little* opportunity to have known *very much* about *at all.* (15)

Here is *Conjure Wife* gutted (witchcraft only might be real and women only "tend" to be witches), *Canticle for Leibowitz* without its Roman Catholic theology, *Left Hand of Darkness* bereft both of love-affair and *liebestod, The Time Machine* without either Marxism or the second law of entropy (!), and plot summaries of *Dune, The Demolished Man,* and *Ringworld* which would make the authors' heads spin. Most unnerving is the cumulative inaccuracy; in Wells' book the Time Traveler resembles the Morlocks more than he does the Eloi, Stephen Byerly (*I. Robot*) might really be human (which destroys the story's point about ethics), Jan (in *Childhood's End*) "It is interesting to note" bases the calculations for his trip "on Einstein's relativity theory" (heck, I thought he used Newton's Fluxions), "wisely" Panshin does not describe faster-than-light travel in *Rite of Passage* because it "might be impossible to do convincingly," Mia "is initiated sexually by Jimmy" (he's a virgin), *kemmer* (in *Left Hand*) has "little legal status" (it has none), Gethenians are "humanoid" (they're human), the Ekumen is "somewhat of a failure" and yet "extremely successful" (no, I'm not making this up), the engineering of *Ringworld* is theoretically sound (never mind that plane-of-rotation thing, Larry), and the sex of the "hero" in *Babel-17* is a "twist" (Delany, known for his flashy commercial novelties). This is not merely a useless book; it is obscene, exploitative, and part of the obscure reasons why Americans cannot read. No student, exposed to this ghastliness, would ever want to; and she or he would be right.

Almost (but not quite) as ravaged is *Political Science Fiction,* a big, bland, Platonic Idea of a

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high-school textbook, which delivers such gems of profundity as "In the United States, political leadership at the national level is determined by voting" (74) and such droning non-questions as "Who is to be the political and literal master—man or his technology?" (5) Students faced with this kind of numbing gorp will instantly flee into pornography, violence, megalomaniac power-tripping, and (just possibly) science fiction, i.e. anything septic. The use of the masculine-preferred* is more offensive here than elsewhere (all the teaching anthologies commit it) simply because there is so little else in the book; to write an "inoffensive" high-school civics text (which is what the editors seem to want to attempt) means omitting race, sex, economics, drugs, culture, perception, biology, i.e. the entire human context of political behavior. One author is a male man and the other a female man but neither gets much beyond Matthew Arnold; here is *Political S.F.* at its most fiery and intransigent (italics mine):

> The anger and frustration felt by many American blacks, *for example, may* derive *in part* from the *feeling* that statements about equality and justice contained in documents *like* the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights do not *have meaning* for them. (10)

The stories — mostly powerful dull — peak in the mid-50's and mid-60's, median date 1959. The few good ones can be found elsewhere; "Remember the Alamo" by R.R. Fehrenbach and Herbert Gold's "The Day They Got Boston" are the only interesting rarities.

Neither Prentice-Hall book shows any definite personality, although *As Tomorrow Becomes Today* has a better selection of stories (possibly due to the aid of the four s.f. authors whom the editor thanks on p. xv). The introductions rehearse the obvious very lumpily ("One danger for the man who travels into the near past is that he may get caught in a time loop" p.7), tub-thump for s.f. as the handmaid of futurology, which was one thing in the 1930's (a voice crying in the wilderness will use all

Not only do the authors talk endlessly about "Man" and "men"; they also complain about the abstraction *of other textbooks! The vast, monolithic figure of Man The Empire Builder, Man The Toolmaker, and Man the Problem-Solver is a standing invitation to falsification and enlarging rhetoric, and an irresistible temptation to invent Man the Blatherer, Man the Dandruff-Shedder, and Man the Lettuce-Slicer. Woody Allen, thou shouldst be with us at this hour.*

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the arguments it can get, even bad ones) and is quite another in 1974, especially when the crier-in-the-wilderness gets the plot of *The Einstein Intersection* as staggeringly wrong as this one does (93-4). A good teacher could avoid (or argue with) the intermatter and concentrate on the stories (Sullivan, like Allen, thinks fiction is made of detachable parts like a watch — "a work of art was broken down into its various components, examined, and then reassembled" p. 3); so the final criticism of the book could be simply its contents page. (One of the (doubtful) pleasures of such a volume is discovering how good writers like Heinlein and Clarke can be when they're good (as they are here). Best in the book: Heinlein's "All You Zombies" and "—And He Built a Crooked House—," Bester's "The Man Who Murdered Mohammad," Lafferty's "Primary Education of the Camiroi" and "Thus We Frustrate Charlemagne," Ellison's "A Boy and His Dog"* and "Repent, Harlequin," Asimov's "Runaround," Knight's sinister "Masks" with its smashing last five words, Sheckley's "Specialist," Clarke's "Sentinel," Cordwainer Smith's "Game of Rat and Dragon" (I'm reminded of Christina Rossetti, who preferred moles and wombats to men), Worthington's "Plenitude," Pohl's "Wizard of Pung's Corners," and Leguin's "Nine Lives." Less well known but very good is Burt Filer's "Backtracked" and a brief stunneroo by Tuli Kupferberg called "Personal."

Speculations has less intermatter, more real personality (sometimes offensively snobbish as in a belligerently silly attack on lit. crit. written by some anti-Asimov who must inhabit the ghostly interstices of the Good Doctor's cranium like the Dr. Edward anti-Teller of the *New Yorker* poem), and much more mixed bag of science fiction, including fine nineteenth-century material and poetry, plus an essay on overpopulation by Arthur Koestler ("Age of Climax"). The "voice" of the anthology, overall, is sentimentally liberal and artistically conservative (the editor believes "the human condition" — there's only one — to be "unchanged and unchanging" on p. 45, cheerily disregarding Asimov's wrath at the back of the book on just this point) and somewhat lacking in middle types of fiction — you have Lafferty and Lovecraft on one side, Sheckley and Pohl on the other. Most of the fiction filling this gap in tone is older material like

Oddly affectionate-cum-horrific as it is: its last line is literally true.

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Kipling's "Easy As A.B.C." or Benet's "Nightmare Number Three." The editor is a curious, goshwowing fellow who thinks that speculative fiction is about controlling inanimate matter because you can't control yourself (and that's jimdandy —p. 11), that fantasy (which is identical with science fiction) is good because it creates "metaphorical reality wherein evil is truly evil without the necessity of rational study of extenuating circumstances" (5), i.e. he is ahistorical, apolitical, and an academickal tragedy-addict. He is also a burbling neofan. Consider (Italics mine):

"Have superior beings visited Earth, programmed primitive Earthlings to become intelligent beings or destroy themselves...? Such questions are as unanswerable *as they are undismissable.* (8)"

He is also vividly human, in a Preface worth the rest of the intermatter put together: a youngster in Picher, Oklahoma, lusting after Dale Arden ("a dress like no one in my town would ever wear"), intensely admiring Flash Gordon, "that clean, blond-haired god" with his "yellow ringlets," and finally throwing up (at the horrible rats in the story) while being driven home by ... his Cherokee father (xvi-xvii).

The poems include goodies by Ammons, Auden, Ginsberg, Poulin, Swenson, William Carlos Williams, and a gorgeous but obscure writer called Walt Whitman ("When I Heard the Learned Astronomer" is *good*). There is a blather of bad, fancy poems about the Apollo landing. Best of the fiction: Benet's "By the Waters of Babylon," "Repent, Harlequin," Graham Greene's "Discovery in the Woods," Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Earth's Holocaust" (yum), Lafferty's "Continued on the Next Rock," Leiber's "A Pail of Air," Lovecraft's "The Outsider," Katherine MacLean's "Pictures Don't Lie," Melville's astonishing "The Tartarus of Maids" (about which the author is awfully obtuse, but maybe he's just being sneaky), Niven's "Neutron Star," Poe's "Mellonta Tauta" (nice to see it around), Saki's "Sredni Vashtar," Silverberg's "Sundance," and two curiosa: a very chopped-up condensation of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (somebodv ought to try publishing it all the way through, despite the hazards, and H.G. Wells's *Chronic Argonauts*, the novella which became *The Time Machine.*

Subtle, sophisticated, intelligent, accurate (and inexpensive), *Modern Science Fiction* is the gem of the bunch. He burbleth not; neither doth he drone. He knows the subject. He even talks about

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the economics of s.f. and the effects of packaging (though he doesn't mention that paperback distributors and retail outlets don't share the publisher's financial risk). In plain English he says fine, illuminating things: "People weren't so sure that they knew what was real and what was not until the eighteenth century" (4) or science fiction is "living metaphor" (10 — exactly what Samuel Delany says about s.f.'s effect on language). The book's intermatter is too compressed, if anything; on p. 402 Judith Merril appears unidentified and shorn of her first name; likewise, much more that the editor says is worth further explanation and illustration. The selections (chronologically arranged, beautifully illustrating the history of the field) are excellent, and — unlike neofen professors — Spinrad is not taken in by naive power-tripping; in fact he loathes it (as one would expect from the author of *The Iron Dream.** I would quibble with some of his choices (e.g. Farmer's "Don't Wash the Carats," far from being the only dangerous story in *Dangerous Visions*, is plain silly—Spinrad's interest in the human sensorium is leading him astray here) but the best thing is to simply list the contents: Campbell's "Twilight," Van Vogt's "Enchanted Village," Del Rey's "Helen O'Loy," Asimov's "Nightfall," Clarke's "The Star," Sturgeon's "Affair with a Green Monkey," Knight's "Stranger Station," Godwin's "The Cold Equations" (rather Eichmannesque, this one), Kornbluth's "The Marching Morons," Bester's "5,271,009" (jeez parbloo cheers!;, Ballard's "The Voices of Time," Moorcock's "Pleasure Garden of Felipe Sagittarius," Spinrad's "No Direction Home" (the most genuine and sophisticated s.f. drug story I've ever read, miles from the usual Unspeakable Temptation or It-Isn't-Real-it's about epistemology),

**A man (not woman) who writes of "pseudo-Wagnerian superpowered hugger-mugger" (13), "murky, adolescent longings for power, strength, peer-group solidarity, and mystic transcendence" (110), and "a machismo of production" (191) may find himself in the same position as Damon Knight and Theodore Sturgeon, who challenged a lot of he-man nonsense but never really overturned it (fictionally, that is) because they were working with only one-half of the social equation. Worried — and sincere — discussions in the Men's House which do not also consider what is happening in the Women's Lodge (are those smoke signals? machine guns? what are they really thinking?) are self-defeating.* This is not a criticism of the book.

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Disch's "Descending" (really a fantasy), Zelanzy's "For a Breath I Tarry," the aforesaid story by Farmer, Dick's "Faith of Our Fathers," Delany's "Aye, and Gomorrah ...," Ellison's "At the Mouse Circus," Silverberg's "In Entrophy's Jaws," and Leguin's "Nine Lives." There is a bibliography of additional works (including novels). A fine book for both students and teachers, as well as plain old readers.

A jazzy, goshwow, speed-of-light, quirky "mini-course" packed with information, with a natural grouping of themes and subjects, considerable history, and a wealth of games and questions (called "probes") from which both students and teachers can crib endlessly and which ought to keep everyone higher than a kite for months (they're sometimes booby-trapped; one is "Try to say ISHFE" p. 83), *Classroom In Orbit* is a fine resource book — not an anthology but an old trunk which you open in the attic and find full of treasures; quotations, questions, hints, games, flat statements (most of them accurate), bibliographies, horrors, provocations, poignancies, everything fast and pointed and designed for take-off. It is more complex and subtle than it seems (although Friend fumbles some things, e.g. the *auteur* theory of film, p. 67) and by approaching the subject the way a fan or writer would, manages to be suitable for any level from (possibly) junior high on up. The book is infinitely sophisticatable. What it needs is a teacher or class that can *fill in* — this is designed to get classes started. The art is scribbly-funny (although the illustration for *Slaughterhouse Five* utterly spoils one of the saddest parts of the novel) and if Heinlein says don't rewrite, don't believe him. (Man the Black Monolith appears again,* despite a chapter on women in s.f., but who's perfect? Anyhow the book invites quarreling.) There is a Supplement which the author wished to have bound with her text; it is full of lists of: anthologies, textbooks, thematic works, critical articles, articles on teaching, films available for classroom use, Hugo winners, &c.) and can be ordered separately and inexpensively from the same publisher. The book itself includes material on s.f. films, TV, *Star Trek*, and fandom.

The English Assassin got squeezed out of my last review by problems of space, not quality. It

Yes, I know there's someone out there turning purple with rage at this point. But I'll leave the subject alone when it leaves me *alone.*

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is Michael Moorcock's third Jerry Cornelius novel, and — less vividly raw than the first, *The Final Programme* (I haven't read *A Cure for Cancer*) — it is sadder, stranger, more crafted, sometimes more beautiful, and far more complex. It is also much more concretely English in its references than the first book and hence somewhat baffling to an American: a kind of subjective world in which everything opens on to Ladbroke Grove (which I take to be something like the Greenwich Village of the '20s), in which disasters happen over and over again and yet people come back after death (to die again), with everything always on the verge of ending, beautiful, odd, funny-melancholy, flatly horrible, take your pick (tanks at Dove Cottage). The book is full of decay, death, war, what Moorcock calls "the poverty trance," the mixing of alternate histories, alternate technologies — well, it calls itself "A Romance of Entrophy" and it *is* a romance — people appear, die, reappear — and die — vitality passes from one character to another (Jerry has to steal his brother's life-force in order to become human at the very end; sister Cathy comments "What a wonderful surprise!" and then "It's time Frank had a turn"); they sail out to sea ("goodbye, England") with Woman-Mountain-Mum-Mrs. Cornelius asleep at the seaside and about to be shelled by a destroyer (she may not be indestructible, after all); and one recalls with mixed feelings Bishop Beezly's munching a young, chocolate-covered ex-nun (he loves candy bars). There are also newspaper clippings about violence and death, often children's— Moorcock doesn't like death, or violence. The author's first Jerry Cornelius book was printed by Avon in paperback; I'm glad he's finally gotten a good publisher and hope S & S readers of Moorcock's other (and vastly inferior) books will all run out and buy *The English Assassin* under the mistaken belief it's all about Prince Elric of Whatchamacallit. They will have exchanged fake-exoticism for real strangeness and (despite the difficulty of pegging English locales and Erte tea gowns) may find they love it. I do. Goodbye, England. Goodbye. Goodbye (Good luck.)

NOTE: Two new fanzines have appeared recently: a feminist one, *The Witch and the Chameleon*, Amanda Bankier, 2 Paisley Avenue South, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada ($3.25/yr) and *Red Planet Earth*, Craig Strete, R.R. #1, Box 208, Celina, Ohio 45822 ($.50 each), "an inter-tribal effort to help

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Indian writers." There are aliens among us.

REPENTANT SILVERBERG

NOTE: In my January 1975 review I committed the kind of blooper about *Born With The Dead* that has made me wish *I* were dead. I didn't say what I meant. I called the book's extremely talented writer "a sossidge-factory trying to become an artist," assuming that everybody knew Mr. Silverberg's factory days ended fifteen years ago and that by "artist" I meant work so faultless and fully realized that one would not wish a word of it changed. Then I went and did it again, reviewing *Stellar 1*. I wish to apologize publicly for my fumble. Silverberg is a *very*-ex-sossidge-factory *still in the process of developing as an artist;* "Schwartz Between the Galaxies" and "Notes from the Pre-Dynastic Epoch" are true quantum-jumps in this process; to my mind they are absolutely satisfying works, without reservations, the kind of fully-fused writing that's rare in any writer's career. And *that* is what I meant.

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C. L. Grant has been contributing some new-fashioned horror stories of late (e.g., the impressive "The Rest Is Silence," September 1974), and this latest is a fine example of a fresh treatment of a traditional horror theme.

White Wolf Calling

by C. L. GRANT

Snow: suspended white water humping over hidden rocks, slashed by a slick black road that edged around the stumped mountains and swept deserted between a pair of low, peaked houses that served as unassuming sentinels at the mouth of the valley; drifting, not diving to sheath needled green arms that bent and held in multiples of thousands, spotting indifferently the tarmac walk that tongued from the half-moon porch of the house on the right. A snowman with stunted arms and holes for eyes squatted awkwardly beside a solitary spruce, watching nothing and making uneasy the brown-bundled man who stood by the mailbox. He leaned heavily against a broad-mouthed shovel, staring at the home opposite, turning his red-capped head to look beyond it to the forest that wavered through the sailing crystals up the slope to blend before the summit into the grey-white air.

No wind. Breathing only as he listened to the sunset, strained to hear the summons of the wolf.

"Mars?"

The shovel skittered from his stiff hand, banged against the walk and angered him with its rifle volley clatter.

"You think you have the power to move that house with just your eyes?"

Turning, he bent to retrieve the shovel, waving his free hand to indicate he had heard, and did not approve. Not so many decades before, he had begun calling his wife Venus because of her shortening of his own name to laughingly deify him; hers was Samantha, but his Venus she was. On the porch now, with crimson

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cheeks and her back reed-fragile, she folded her arms against the cold, waiting as he took a frustrated poke at the soiled snow the village plow had left to harass his cleaning. The mount was almost ice, and he glared at his gloves as if to blame them before hurrying to the house.

"Get inside, you dope, before you catch your death."

"I haven't seen the wolf, Venus. I'll probably live forever."

"Quit your smiling, Mars. That isn't funny at all. Get inside."

"You go on ahead. I'm almost done."

"I'm stubborn, Mars Tanner. I like to watch you killing yourself while that shiny new snowblower I gave you for Christmas lies rotting in the garage."

He pinched at her nose, tugged a lock of hair. "I may not be as young as I used to be, kid, but I can still handle anything that comes out of the sky."

She made a face and thumped him on the back as he went through the door, then rushed down the darkened hallway into the sweet-smelling kitchen before the warm stinging yanked at his parchment face and dried his lips.

"Tea?"

"No, thanks."

"Coffee?"

He cocked his head and raised an eyebrow. "Every time you ask, and every time I have to tell you, dummy, that coffee gives me gas. When are the boys coming back?"

"If they're sober, they'll be back in time for supper, as always," she said, taking his cap and stiffly new coat to hang by the wood-fed stove. "Some boys. They're almost forty, you know."

"In age, maybe, but their heads are at least two dozen years behind."

Venus tugged at the strings of her apron, letting the blue and yellow cloth tighten around her waist before she wriggled to settle it into place. Her hair was bunned grey, narrowing her face, sharpening her nose to a pale robin's beak. Only her chin remained youthfully rounded, even when she was mad.

"I don't like the way you make fun of them, Mars. They've come to hard times, in case you've forgotten the accident. It wasn't easy for them, losing both their wives as suddenly as that." She stared at him standing by the refrigerator. "Two daughters-in-law, and no grandchildren. It hasn't been easy for me, either."

"Those so-called women, and I'm sorry to say it, thought the boys had money, Venus. They took one look at our property here, didn't think anything at all about how land is cheap in this part of the state, and they talked themselves into believing we were rich. And neither Carter or Jonathan did

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anything to discourage them. Those women were too young and too damned impatient, and neither of my sons had brains enough to handle them."

Suddenly annoyed with himself for speaking when he should have been thinking, Mars poked aside the curtains on the back door and glared at the first staggered row of pine at the end of the yard he had cleared himself during their first summer in the valley. Seeing nothing, more angry because he thought he might, he sat at the table and dry-washed his hands. Venus moved behind him, rested her cheek against his still-thick hair and sighed just loud enough for him to hear. Knowing she would soon begin to caution him about little Tommy across the road, he shifted uneasily and cleared his throat.

"Into town today, I heard Pierson talking at the barbershop."

"It's about time you got a haircut," she said, sitting, one boned hand snaking unconsciously across her face in remembrance of a time when her hair was black and hung in gleaming ripples in front of one eye. "You're beginning to look like a sheep dog. Doesn't look like a very good one, though. Even without my glasses I can see it doesn't look like a very good one."

"That's because I didn't get one. I was to the hardware store looking up a new hammer when Pierson called me in for a chat. He says, and you know how Pierson is when he says anything, he told me fat McKenzie saw the wolf last week, just before his car smacked into the telephone pole."

"He was drinking. The newspaper said so. And that mechanic had done something to the steering. You think they had a trial for nothing?"

"McKenzie was scared. He told me."

"Of what, for heaven's sake? That mechanic? Mac owed that man a fortune for gambling, and practically everyone in town heard them fighting one time or another. My God, Mars, Mac outweighed him by a hundred pounds. If he was scared of anything, it was of having to pay the man and have nothing left for his wine. You know he always drank. I knew him for thirty-five years and can't remember the day he was last sober. Even on his wedding night when he married that Cranford woman."

Mars grinned. "You were there, I suppose?"

"Mars!"

"I wouldn't be surprised. You do get around, you know."

She feigned a roundhouse slap, he mimed a ducking wince, and they laughed, forgetting for the moment what McKenzie had seen.

"I'm going to take Tommy out

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to the cabin tomorrow to help me with the wood."

Venus wiped at the smiling tears in her eyes and shook her head. "That boy's not good for you, Mars. He's not your son, you know, and I doubt that the Dovnys will approve of your trying to make him."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Venus, his father's never home, and his mother's flat on her back because of that skiing accident that busted her back. He happens to like my company, and I happen to like his. And with no one else his age around close to play with, we get along just fine."

"Well...."

"We can take care of ourselves, dear, don't worry. If I see the wolf, I'll spit in its eye."

Venus tried to smile, rose instead and bustled meaninglessly at the stove where supper was already steaming in three huge black pots.

Neither of them admitted believing there was a snow wolf in the mountains, had never even heard of such a green-eyed creature until the Dovny's purchase of the land opposite them where they had constructed the house Mars hated because it spoiled his rocking chair view. He had met the Slavic father only once, at a Board of Education luncheon two years before at the village school. The man's English had been formal, as if memorized from a grammar book, but he charmed and was charming, and Mars had become friends with the blond-banged son when he had straightened a runner on the little boy's sled. The boy was the one who had told him and the village about the white wolf.

"Oh, I get it," Mars had said as he pulled boy and sled up a slope behind the house. "You're talking about one of those werewolf things. I've seen them a lot on television, on those horror show festivals."

The boy frowned bewilderment until Mars had explained, then shook his head and squinted to think harder. "No, the wolf only comes when someone is to die. It's not a person."

"Funny, but I never heard of that until you came around. How does it work? Is it kind of a family tradition? Maybe a Czech folk story, something like that?"

The boy had shrugged.

"Have a chocolate bar?"

The boy nodded and stuck it in his pocket.

Mars had completely forgotten that day until Samson O'Brien claimed he had shot at a wolf bigger than any he'd seen in his life. He was jeered when he failed to produce a pelt, or the tracks when he led a group of men to the site of the hunt. A week to the day later, his wife knifed him in the back

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when she learned he had been seeing the daughter of the mayor.

"Mars, are you trying to hypnotize yourself, or has my company gone stale after all these years?"

He blinked, tried a boyish grin before shaking his head. "Sorry," he said, leaning back in his chair. "I was thinking."

"Well, stop it. The boys are home. I heard them on the stairs."

"You want me to go up?"

"What for?"

He shrugged. "Talk to them. See what their plans are. God knows there isn't any paying work around here."

"We won't be around that long, Pop," and Mars grimaced when he turned so abruptly he twisted his side.

The sons were twins, dark-haired, taller than their parents and heavier about the chest and waist. Carter was the younger by three minutes, but his face was shadowed with lines and puffs; Jonathan was the same as he had been at thirty, except for the eyes that seemed perpetually half-closed.

"I wasn't trying to ease you out," Mars said, almost pouting, while they noisily took their places at the table.

"I know, Pop," Carter said.

"Of course he knows," Jonathan said, not bothering to disguise a slighting sneer. "He knows everything, don't you, Carter boy? Even took Pop's advice and knew enough to put the girls on that goddamned, beat-up excuse for a train."

"That's enough!" Venus said, slapping plates down in front of them. "The past is past, and I won't have that kind of talk in my house. You two have got to get back on your feet again, and soon. Your father's too proud to admit it, and too good to say it, but we can't have you around here indefinitely. It's too much of a strain."

"I know," Carter said, rising to help ladle the soup. "Just need a little readjusting, that's all. Besides, my leave's up in a week and I'll have to be getting back to camp."

"My goodness," Jonathan said, "does even a captain have to run like a buck private? Something else I didn't know. When are you going to make major, by the way? Ever?"

"Go to hell," Carter said.

"Language, brother," Jonathan said, scooping chunks of butter onto steaming slices of homemade bread.

"That's enough from the both of you," Mars said. "Your mother's right, as always. My pension can't handle everything. We love you both, but soon you've got to make a move. I'm talking especially to you, Jon. Your brother at least has a check coming in."

"Pop," Carter said before his

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twin could snap again, "why don't you sell the house? Maybe move to one of those retirement places. I know you love it here and all, but for crying out loud, the physical upkeep alone is going to do you in one of these days."

"I'll buy the place," Jonathan said, suddenly solicitous.

"Neither of you will," Venus said, taking her seat. "We've been here since you were born, and I'm not about to leave it now. Say grace, Mars, before I lose my appetite."

And dinner passed into evening as the snow greyed, crusted, and was littered with snapping fallen branches weakened by ice. Fireplace flames shadowed the living room in spite of the lamps, and Mars stood at a window, listening to his shattered family playing at playing cards, listening later, as he wandered the house looking for sleep, to whispers: the house itself, talking down to dawn through the mouth of the furnace, the pops of cooling wood in the fireplace, the creaks of boards searching for a comfortable place to shy away from the rising wind; the wind, riding the back of the snow, drifting powder over the road, pushing against thin glass, humming to itself in wires strung through the air, once to a crescendo covering hushed words; the words, snapping, biting, accusing, and prodding the weaknesses of the old man in vain attempts at deadly prophecy, husking laughter when one suggested the other do Mars the fatal blow.

Standing in the hallway, Mars shivered at the door of his sons' room, pleading for a prayer, sucking back the trembling that directed him to break down the barrier and cast them out.

He thought of Tommy, the surrogate son, and cursed his lack of wisdom that had made him a failure.

In his own bed again, wondering, he listened to the wind, heard faintly the cry of the dead calling for death.

And in the morning, after he had seen the brothers off to the village to notch another day at the tavern bar, after picking up after himself in bedroom and bath, he stood in the back yard and waited as Tommy ran awkwardly through the snow to him, dragging a sled still shining with varnish. Mars smiled, adjusted the peaked cap that covered the long blond hair, pinched the rounded cheek with his glove and led the boy into the woods, up the slope to a narrow plateau where freshly cut stumps pockmarked the ground.

A makeshift shed euphemistically called a cabin stood bleakly at the far end of the clearing. It was missing a front wall, served as a storage area for the logs Mars cut

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twice each winter. Tommy scrambled from stump to stump, climbing, daring Mars to spill him into the snow. The old man smiled, encouraged the boy to play on his own while he pulled a tarpaulin from a handmade toboggan and began loading the split wood, strapping each layer from front to back, finished with the canvas strapped side to side.

It was noon, and he was sweating, gasping, but not yet ready to give in to the aching that stretched his muscles and pounded through his lungs. He pointed out to the boy the peak where three hunters had lain wounded when a local man had gone berserk one evening in the tavern, escaped from the sheriff and had done some hunting of his own. They had endured the freezing night unprotected except for their clothes, only one surviving to testify at the trial, dying shortly after in the county hospital.

"They saw the wolf," Tommy said solemnly, and Mars laughed, cuffed him on the back of the head.

"You never did tell me how that works," he said, deliberately light.

Tommy rubbed a black mitten across his nose and sniffed. "I told you. The wolf comes when somebody's to die."

"But no one's been killed, much less even scratched, round here in a hundred years. By a wolf, that is."

Tommy looked up into the old man's face. "The wolf doesn't do it, silly. Father says the wolf ... I don't know. It just comes. I don't know what it eats, but it causes, not does."

"You know, maybe I should get to know your father better," Mars said, taking hold of the unraveling grey rope that was tied to the ends of the sled's steering bar. He waved the boy on, and they moved up past the cabin. "I haven't seen him in nearly two years to talk to properly. I hope he doesn't think I'm unfriendly. I just never got around to it somehow."

"He works in the city," the boy said proudly. "He comes home on weekends and sleeps most of the time. He's very tired."

Mars nodded.

"Mommy's sick all the time."

"I know, son. I heard about it in the village."

"She can't sit up like us. Her back hurts all the time."

"I know, son."

Tommy jumped off the sled, and Mars sighed gratitude as they trudged in tandem toward the run they had made the week before.

"You know something, Mr. Tanner, I think my father's trying to scare me with the wolf story. He said it comes all the way from our home in ... in...." He stumbled silently, mouthing the name and trying to give it voice. Mars has

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learned early not to help him. Czechoslovakia was the boy's private problem. One of these days, Mars thought, he'll pronounce it right and we'll have a damn big party.

The snow crackled beneath them as they turned around, hissed like scrapping glass when Mars lay on the sled, Tommy climbed onto his back, and they raced down to the clearing.

Grinning and shouting, Mars sideswiped a log and spilled them both into a wave of snow that seeped down their necks like traces of ice. Lying with his face up, Mars squinted at the impossibly bright clouds, widened his eyes as a shadow darkened them and saw the laughing boy hugging his face.

"Mars, I think I need you."

"My God," Mars said and clasped the boy to him, closing his eyes to keep them from emptying, opening them to see the wolf.

It was white to its tail, with glittering beads of snow and ice clinging softly to its unmatted fur, swinging as it moved silently around the edge of the clearing. Breath in turbulent rivers of misted grey snorted from its nostrils while it turned around and faced them, its ears upright, its head slightly cocked. It stalked, slowly, and Mars rocked, still chuckling in his throat, keeping the boy's face pressed to his chest. The white wolf circled, and Mars twisted on his buttocks to keep the animal from getting behind him. Snow flecked from the sky, veiling but not hiding the green eyes that were deep close to black in the creature's magnificent head.

A ghost or a god? Mars thought as he pulled his legs from underneath him and struggled to stand without releasing Tommy.

"Hey," the boy said. "You're hurting me."

"Maybe," Mars whispered, "but you're tough. You can take it."

"Sure," Tommy said and squeezed harder, laughing.

The wolf backed away when Mars steadied himself, watched as man and boy sidled toward the toboggan. It bobbed its head once, whipped its tail and trotted off without looking back.

Tommy began coughing.

"You got a cold?"

"Same one I had last week."

"Come on," Mars said, swallowing to keep his voice level, "I'll get some warm soup into your craw."

"What does that mean?"

"It's a foreign word, son. Foreign to you, that is."

"I know a lot of foreign words, too."

"Good. Maybe someday you can teach them to me."

"When, Mars?"

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"I don't know. Someday. Soon, I guess."

With the runners freshly waxed and the slope working with him, Mars had little trouble hauling the load of lumber down to the house. Tommy pushed from behind, calling out every few feet to be sure Mars knew he was helping. And when they parted, Venus handing him a pot of stew to bring to his mother, Tommy waved, stepped into the road and was nearly struck by the car that raced out of the village and into the driveway.

"Goddamnit, you idiot," Mars shouted at Carter. "Why the hell can't you watch where you're going?"

Carter heaved his bulk out of the car and stumbled past silently, muttering nothings and leaving a waft of mixed beer and liquor.

Mars grabbed him by the shoulder and yanked him around. "Where's Jonathan?"

Carter shrugged, shook the hand off and staggered into the house, brushing past Venus without taking off his coat.

Cursing, then, his own thoughtlessness, Mars spun around, but Tommy was already on the first step of his own porch. He turned and waved, and Mars wanted to call out. He lifted a hand instead and sagged into the kitchen. Despite Venus' proddings, he remained silent throughout the evening meal, wondering what would have happened if Tommy had seen the green-eyed specter. It was a miracle he hadn't, and Mars was moved once to laugh at his suspicions of the divine. That he was frightened he wouldn't admit, not even to himself.

Jonathan was returned by two of Mars' friends just before midnight, and the three of them carried the unconscious son into the bedroom, making little attempt to keep their voices low since Carter was already asleep and would not awaken until his stomach decided it was time to empty.

The fireplace, then, and the aroma of burning pine while Venus went to work on some knitting of hers: a scarf she had started the winter before but hadn't the patience to finish when its perfection eluded her clumsy fingers.

"What is it, Mars?"

He looked away from the fire.

Thinking: *McKenzie.*

"I saw the white wolf today."

"You didn't." She set the yarn at her side and leaned forward with her arms resting trembling on her thighs.

A bubble of sap boiled.

"Bigger than life and twice as heavy. Damndest thing I ever saw in my life."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

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"We didn't believe there was such a thing, remember?"

"You saw it," she said. "It must be so. You never did have much imagination, Mars."

Thinking: *three men bleeding.*

"I think it was trying to get the boy to look at it."

Venus hummed nervously, then left her armchair for the sofa and curled her legs beneath her as she rested against Mars' unmoving arm. "Now you are imagining."

"You just said I never did, but maybe you're right, I don't know. I was thinking, though, that this thing, whatever it is, was never around before the Dovny people came."

"You saying maybe they brought it with them? A pet of some kind?"

Mars didn't know. From the time he had returned to the house from the clearing, he had been seeing movement in the corners of his eyes that escaped when he turned his head, white movement speckled green.

"O'Brien," he said without realizing he had spoken aloud.

"Hush that talk," she said, gliding a hand against his mouth until he kissed it and carefully placed it between his own. "All those men were just bums, flops, failures, and I don't mourn their passing. And that wolf is just a wolf and had nothing to do with them."

Sleet began exploding like glass against the house.

"One of these days it'll move out to the city."

"Into the city?" She laughed, gasping, incredulous. "Come on, Mars Tanner, can you really see that beast walking the streets of a big town? With no one doing anything but staring or running scared? In a city, Mars?"

He thought: as he had left the clearing with Tommy, one backward glance had been sufficient to note that the snow where the wolf had been pacing was clean. There were no depressions to indicate an animal of that size had walked a warning.

"Mars, you're frightened, aren't you?"

He watched the sparks like fire rain raise up into the chimney. "Venus," he said, "we've done bad by our children. One we drove into the army, the other we just drove. I don't think we ever really knew how to be parents."

"We did the best we could."

It was a tired argument, one that usually left them not speaking for hours.

"I should have cared more, I guess, been more ambitious, but the store was good enough for me."

"They went to school, Mars: They learned things."

"Yeah," he said, scratching his stubbled jaw, "and blamed me for

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not doing the same."

A commotion on the steps forestalled her answer, caused her to straighten as if her sons would have been affronted by their parents' intimacy.

They came down into the foyer carrying suitcases and already wearing their overcoats. As Mars strode angrily toward them, Carter lifted a hand. "Don't say it, Pop, but we have to go. It's no good here, and you were right yesterday."

"The dear captain's going to get me something at the PX," Jonathan said.

"But why now?"

"Listen, Pop, there's no sense in our making it any harder on any of us. Some folks got the touch to do things right, and some don't. We don't."

"What's the matter with your eyes?"

"I been drinking a lot, in case you hadn't noticed. Just let us go quietly, and maybe one of us will write when things get settled. When we get the time."

Venus remained on the sofa, tilting her cheek to her sons' kisses, brief and without even momentary affection. And they were out the door before Mars could think of an appropriate farewell to forty years.

"Samantha," he said, his back to the room, "don't ever let anyone tell you that I didn't love you."

Suddenly there were shouts, and Carter came running back inside.

"Your rifle, Pop, where is it? Never mind," and he snatched at the weapon cradled in the wall rack in the hall. Mars hurried to the door, but Carter brushed past him, answering with a wordless shout the urgings of his brother.

"God," he said, stopping long enough to pull a box of cartridges from a breakfront and stuff the magazine. "You should see that animal, Pop. Biggest damn thing in the world."

"Oh, my Christ!" Mars said and ran into the kitchen, grabbed his coat and slapped on his hat. Venus he pushed back into a chair as she tried to follow, and with a muttered "Samantha" rushed outside, nearly colliding with his sons who were standing on the edge of the porch. Jonathan had the rifle to his shoulder, sighting, waiting until Mars saw the white wolf trot unconcernedly from behind the spruce in the center of the yard. His son fired; the bright star flared from the barrel, and a puff shattered from the snowman's head. The three men descended to the walk when it was obvious Jonathan had missed.

"Never could shoot worth a damn," Carter said, grabbing for the stock, being pushed roughly aside.

"That will make a hell of a

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coat," Jonathan said, stalking now as the wolf padded from the yard to the slippery road. Immediately, lights in the Dovny house blinked on sporadically until the grounds were lighted with squares of pale sun. The front door opened and Tommy stepped out.

Mars watched the progress of the wolf, unable to speak, dizzy from the cold that lanced at his face in droplets of sleet. Tommy called out, waving, and began to climb down from his porch. Jonathan swung the rifle and fired again.

"The boy!" Mars shouted. "Goddamnit, Jon, watch the boy!"

"Shut up, Pop," one of them said.

Tommy had reached the bottom of the steps, was angling across the front of the house when the wolf broke into a run toward the corner nearest him. Tommy sprinted after it, and Mars, unthinking, ran across the road toward him.

Someone shouted and the wolf halted, grey now beyond the light.

Tommy clapped his hands and shouted encouragement as Jonathan moved to the center of the road and took aim.

The wolf moved, placing the boy between it and the rifle.

Mars, arms spread and mouth open, flung himself into the air.

Jonathan fired.

And in the silence echoing from flake to flake as sleet turned to snow, Mars sprawled on the ground, twisting his head from side to side as if searching for a door into a room without pain. He gasped as Tommy roughly rolled him onto his back, heard the careless shriek of tires as a car skidded, straightened and bulleted toward the village. They'll never make the turn at the railroad, he thought.

Distantly, he heard Venus screaming.

Into the snow he opened his eyes and saw Tommy kneeling beside him.

"You never ate the chocolate I gave you," he said through the sparks that wouldn't leave him be. "Probably threw away the stew, too." He arched his back and gasped. "Don't suppose I could get a second chance, could I? I could do better."

Tommy shook his head. His left arm nestled in the ruff around the neck of a white wolf. His right hand stroked the head of another. He bent his face closer to peer into Mars' face, and Mars saw the glimmering green in his eyes, feeding on his failure before he died.

"Daddy's home," the boy said. "You said you wanted to meet him."

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Raylyn Moore's new story treats the same theme as the Silverberg novel, but in a very different fashion. Here, a team of government prophets provide a society of near-perfect safety, except for one problem . . .

The Milewide Steamroller

by RAYLYN MOORE

The Blind Cyclist

Those who caught sight of him pedaling along beside the highway always looked twice. Even without the red-tipped white cane protruding out over the front of the bike, he was worth more than a casual glance.

The breadth of his shoulders, the massive impression of his muscular body were wonderfully inappropriate to the slender frame of the racing cycle on which he perched like a pouter pigeon on a high, thin wire.

And then there was that crazy orange pennant with black lettering: DOOM. It was fixed to a small staff just behind the cycle seat. The staff rose up as much as six feet with the pennant fluttering madly at the top.

He was of uncertain age, well built, not old, not young, exuding strength and purpose. With a hint of intransigence about him. His skin was weathered dark, his beard ragged.

Even on the uphill slopes he kept a good speed. The bike had a lot of gears, and the long, flexible cane was fastened onto the handlebars somehow so it swept back and forth like an antenna. Whatever the system was, it worked. The man always seemed able to feel when the highway curved and go with it, and whenever there was drifting fine sand over the asphalt (one of the worst hazards for a cyclist) or an obstacle such as a parked car on the roadside, or a dead animal, or a carton fallen from a passing van, the cycle always swerved aside in plenty of time.

Every now and then (as is to be expected in a cynical world) someone would decide it was just an act, he wasn't really blind. A car would slow to match the cycle's speed and they would run along

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neck-and-neck awhile, the motorist peering under the wide brim of the big Stetson which the blind man wore. But there was nothing to see. The cyclist's eyes were covered with wraparound mirror glasses with the light rays bouncing off them, and pictures of whatever countryside the cyclist was traveling through unreeling there.

Dream Team

Whenever an opening came up in the group, there would be a flashflood of applications arriving at the famous Perfect Safety Towers out in the New Mexican desert. No surprise in that, for the twenty-one men and women in the group were the most important, the most romantic, the most heroic people in the nation and the highest paid, with more fans than all tv and movie actors and sports stars together, and more prestige than the NASA bunch whose hides they had saved a good many times.

Schoolchildren grew up fantasizing about one day getting to be a member of the Dream Team, while ambitious parents badgered school psychometrists, hoping some faint hint would show in the cume records of their little geniuses which would make them eligible upon graduation to go on to dream-training school.

But that happened only rarely, for this kind of giftedness was not always apparent early in life. Neither was it inevitably isolable from test scores. These were the reasons for the expensive national ads the Perfect Safety Council occasionally ran, under the rather absurd impression there might be someone somewhere in the country who could prove eligible, but hadn't yet heard of the Perfect Safety program or the Dream Team. "Only bona fide precognitives with a certified history of at least 85.6 percent accuracy may apply," always appeared in those handsome recruiting notices among the fine type at the bottom, as deflating as the Surgeon General's admonition nestled in the meadowgrass of Marlboro Country. But it was true: training was only the icing on the doughnut; to make the Dream Team, a person first had to get himself born with the gift of prophecy.

The Blind Cyclist

At the foot of a long, hard upslope, a green pickup stopped. "Mighty hot day, friend. Wanta load the bike in the truck and hitch yourself a few miles' rest?"

"I wouldn't mind." Lifting the two-wheeler as if it were made of matchstick, the big man deposited it in the truck bed. He shrugged out of his backpack and put that in too. Then he opened the cab and got in. "What state are we in?"

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"Ilinois, going into Iowa."

"And what day of the month?"

"June thirty. Hundred forty-eight more shopping days. Name's Hank Withers. What's about that leetle flag with the funny word?"

"It's a prophecy. I'm a seer."

"Hey, that's pretty good. A seer. So what do you see?"

"Nothing good. A dire calamity will befall if we go on as we are now."

"But — that can't happen any more, can it? I thought the guvamint had all things like that nailed down and under control now."

Dream Team

The Team's amazing success record had a lot of side effects, but not necessarily bad ones. In addition to virtually wiping out mental illness by providing every citizen with a sense of security, it was a great boon to the parapsychology crowd, who, after years of near starvation and endurance of the slings and arrows of ridicule and belittlement at the hands of the "real" scientists, were now getting all sorts of funds diverted their day, were in fact skimming theirs right off the top before even the military.

Famous and prestigious as the program was, however, it was no sideshow, no tv spectacular. Few people not directly employed by Perfect Safety ever had any closer look at what was going on than the familiar sight of the slender towers as they appeared from the highway. They were miles away across the southwestern sands, shimmering with promise under the desert sun, inset at the geographic heart of a restricted area covering vast acreage formerly occupied by another government project at one time thought vital, but abandoned since the beginning of the more important present program.

Congressmen with visitors' passes might get through a few of the gates, perhaps even up to the groundfloor of the first tower, where they would be met cordially by a knockout receptionist-hostess and a pseudophysician in clinical whites. They would be briefed about what was going on from a series of slides and tapes which the visitors could as easily have assimilated in their own homes or offices, given lunch in a softly melodic cafeteria with potted strelizia, and then driven back to the main gate by airconditioned limousine.

The Blind Cyclist

"Excuse me, Mr. Withers, but you better slow your truck down."

"How's that?"

"You're going to have a blowout in about two minutes and

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at this speed it would send us up a tree."

The green truck slowed steeply, the tire blew, but harmlessly, and they rolled to a stop by the side of the highway.

"By jings, you saved my life, stranger."

"Mine too, don't forget."

"But — hey, I bet *you* could get a job with a guvamint. Be on that team. You sure got the stuff."

"They won't have me. They think they're saving the world, but it's my function to save them, which isn't saying they'll let me. It's a sticky business."

"Why, look here, you must be even- *better* than they are. If they'da been really on the beam, I'd of got a call from the Perfect Safety Council this morning at home, so's I wouldn't of started out on this bum tire."

"Well, nobody's perfect, even among those who claim that distinction. Come on. I'll help you change that wheel if you've got a spare along."

Dream Team

Especially in the inner sanctum of the institution everything was handled with error-proof care. AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY signs were everywhere. Soft amethyst light bathed the corridors, which were studded with delicately engineered sound-swallowing devices just in case some thoughtless junior technician failed to heed the NO NOISE PLEASE warnings winking redly over every doorway leading into the critical area.

For inside it all, at the secret core, in a perennially twilit oblong room not unlike an ordinary hospital ward, the Dream Team worked. The work was done on an ordinary schedule too, in three eight-hour shifts of seven persons each.

Seven beds, in seven partially enclosed cells. A Team member in each bed sleeping. Seven green-garbed attendants with the most delicate recording equipment waiting at the bedsides.

As soon as an attendant perceived, by EEG reading or simply by observing the saccadic motions of the sleeper assigned to him, that the Team member was dreaming, the recorder was turned on and, at the proper moment, the attendant woke the Team member and asked him or her to record the dream just dreamed.

Whenever two dreamers reported the same dream about a coming event, a triangulation of the facts was plotted. Sometimes an exact date would be missing or a location would emerge too murkily to be of practical use. Often the data were completed only when a third or fourth Team member

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added his own dream to the plot. But once all the facts were in hand, buttons were pressed and messages went winging out from the high towers to warn whatever official agency was concerned.

If the dreamers dreamed, say, about a plane accident to flight number soandso out of O'Hare Airport at ten o'clock of a Tuesday night, the flight was canceled for that Tuesday and several Tuesdays to come.

Or if the Team dreamed of a politician being assassinated, or a rich man's son being kidnaped, or even of a little old lady in Boone City being pursesnatched (this was a democracy, wasn't it? no crime or accident was too insignificant to put out warning bulletins on; the rule was that if it was important enough for the dreamers to have dreamed, it was important), the same procedures were conscientiously followed.

Marvelous how the scoffers had shut up. And after the program had been going only about six weeks. The highway accident rate plummeted fantastically. The commercial aviation incidence of disaster vanished completely. In fact, all air catastrophes might have been wiped out if in those early days of Team work there hadn't been a few freaks who went out anyhow in their private planes and their hang gliders or with their parachute clubs even after they'd received official warnings from the Perfect Safety Council. They were the exceptions that proved the rule, so to speak. After that no one doubted any more that, in an organized setting, the psychics could save the world and everyone in it by predicting calamity so it could be averted.

The real wonder seemed to be that it had taken so long to think up. Dream Team work depended on no new invention, no notion that hadn't been heard of back in the dawn of human life when some grubby troglodyte prophet dreamt of a flood and it came to pass (after which he was either stoned to death or set up in business as a priest). So it was mighty strange to many minds that no one had figured it all out before and saved the *Titanic*, John Dillinger, Bobby Franks, Judge Crater, several presidents of the republic, the Coconut Grove, the Centralia miners, Stanford White, the *Morro Castle*, the two airliners over the Grand Canyon, and many more. And would it work for wars? Odd about that. The truth was the nations of the world were now all so preoccupied with their internal safety, the satellite countries scurrying to set up Dream Teams of their own after the larger powers had pointed the way, that no one had time for anything else.

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It remained to be seen — because of the relatively short time the system had been in operation — whether the dreamers could, Joseph-like, foresee the slow-growing, cumulative crises such as crop failures resulting eventually in widespread famine. But there seemed no reason to believe they could not.

Inevitable that a few soreheads from the sporting world would complain that the Perfect Safety Council had taken all the fun out of spectator sports such as autoracing, boxing, motorcycle climbs and jumps, rodeos, football, and so on, by canceling those particular events which would end in death or serious injury.

Inevitable, too, the coldblooded chorus of protest from neomalthusians and cryptofascists that the Perfect Safety program certainly did nothing for the overpop problem. But they were answered by the more humane visionaries who declared that the enhanced safety factor for space exploratory work meant that a new-worlds colonization project would be realized that much sooner.

The Blind Cyclist

"Thanks for your help, stranger. I better stop at the next garage, get that blowout patched so's to have another spare."

"No rush. You won't have another tire go on this truck for the next ten thousand miles."

"That a fact? Listen, like I was saying, if you're so good at predicting, how come you're not rich? Them ads always say they want people like you. I can't see why they turned you down."

"I didn't say they *had* turned me down, just that they won't have me. Actually, I haven't applied yet. I'm on my way there now, to try to give them my message, but I can already see what'll happen."

"Yeah? Well, yeah, of course you can."

"But I have to try, because that's what I'm here for."

"You going to cycle all the way to New Mexico?"

"I could make it. I've come a long way so far."

"Listen, I already owe you a debt of gratitude. And it just so happens I'm a widower and since I retired from the hardware business I'm pretty much my own man. How's about if I just drive on west and take you there? Won't take more'n a couple days. I drive at a pretty good clip, as you noticed."

"I'd be much obliged."

"What did you say your name is?"

"You can call me Savvo."

Dream Team

There was one piece of information that never came out in

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any of the Dream Team fan magazines telling about the private lives and loves of the magic personalities. And that was what happened to the dreamers after they retired. Though it was common knowledge that occupational mortality was high — a member had an average life expectancy on the Team of only three point two years, even less than a baseball player — the inquisitive searchlight of publicity never followed a member beyond his termination of employment. It was simply assumed that because of the arduousness of the career, the generously pensioned alumni were enjoying their well-earned rest in luxurious surroundings. Somewhere.

And this was partly true. For the private psychiatric institutions to which nearly all former dreamers (actually eighty-nine percent) were assigned were the poshiest to be found.

What happened in these cases was that they would go raving mad on the job. "Flaming out," it was called around the Towers. First a growing restlessness, then a tendency to react with extreme anxiety, even screaming terror, to their own dreams. Finally a howling madness would overtake them in which they saw a vision of indescribable proportions and details (which is why the vision was never really described). They would be hurried away to avoid demoralizing their teammates. Not that it ever quite came to that. After the agency experts learned to recognize the early symptoms of flaming out, those about to be afflicted were quickly retired, pensioned and removed to the resthomes with no undignified rupture in routine.

The fact of this sorry fate awaiting so many who served their country with such distinction might, it was feared by the Council, discourage new recruits, which is of course partly why so much secrecy surrounded the flameouts, and for that matter the whole operation. Yet it didn't seem to work that way. Even after recruits became Team members and learned — a certain amount of rumoring being inevitable in such an enterprise — what was likely in store for them, they did not resign. It was a case of each thinking this was the other fellow's problem, the fate of the dreamer in the next bed, and none of their own. They knew *they* wouldn't go like that.

The Blind Cyclist

"In the first place," said Savvo, "when anyone does any heavy tampering with the natural order, there is sure to be some kind of displacement. Take for instance catastrophe. It has always served a

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purpose, giving the human race an immunity to shock and hardship."

"I can see that," agreed Hank Withers. He walked along beside Savvo from the door of the truckstop restaurant out into the hot parking lot but did not assist him. Savvo was feeling his way confidently with the flexible red-tipped white cane which he had removed from the front of his cycle, and which quivered over the ground like a live thing.

"Without this immunity to shock and hardship, I think the human race cannot survive. What is happening is very serious. The Perfect Safety people have been in business for five years now, which means that for half a decade all major and many minor calamities have been prevented from occurring. As you can imagine, if you think about it, this puts a tremendous strain on the fabric of probability. Before very long there must come a rending and a reckoning."

"Something that big coming up, wouldn't them that's in the business see it in time to sidestep it, like they do the others?"

"Yes, most of them probably see it, but some catastrophes are too large to be recognized for what they are. For instance, death may materialize for a small fish in the form of a whale, but the whole shape and nature of so huge a beast could never be taken in by a victim so small. He might not even know to move out of the way. As for sidestepping, you can't sidestep a milewide steamroller."

The green pickup moved from the parkinglot back into the highway and sped westward for a while. Finally Hank Withers said, "Far as I can see then, the only way to get shut of the big one that's coming is to stop predicting the smaller ones that might have happened every day. And that's a guvamint project. Once a guvamint project is going, it's no easy thing to get it stopped."

"I'll say not."

Dream Team

The receptionist in Personnel happened to get the call from the gateman at a time when her chief was in his office. "Mr. Petaja, there's a man at the main gate who claims to be a superpsychic."

"If he wants to apply for a Team vacancy, he'll have to go through regular channels. Tell him to go home and write us a letter with proof of his proficiency signed by an authorized parapsychologist of his choice."

"He's already said that if you tell him to do that, then I'm to tell you that he's willing to give full particulars immediately on the dream now being dreamed by the Team."

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Mr. Petaja hesitated. "That's interesting. I don't believe anyone's ever offered to do that before. Well, we don't want to be thought inflexible, do we? Let's have the data and I'll call upstairs and see if we can confirm it."

"He said that if you agreed to hear the dream, I'm to tell you it has to do with a retired artillery captain going berserk in a restaurant in Indianapolis and killing seventeen people."

Mr. Petaja smiled disbelievingly and kept the line open to his receptionist while he checked with a Dream Team aide upstairs. Then he got back on the line and said, "Tell the gatekeeper to forget it, Miss Pross, the man out front is a charlatan. No info has come through the Team about anybody shooting up a restaurant."

About half an hour later, though, when he had all but forgotten the incident, Petaja got a fast call from the same Team aide. Three Team members had just dreamed about the retired captain in the restaurant and an alert had gone out. Now the chief of operations upstairs wanted to talk to the applicant at the gate. Immediately. Petaja told Miss Pross to have a pass issued to him at once, and if he'd already left the outer gate, to have someone follow his car and bring him back.

But the blind cyclist had not left, having "seen" that he would be sent for. He was still saying good-bye to Hank Withers. "Thanks for everything, Mr. Withers. Drive carefully."

"Why?" said Withers suspiciously. "You got some reason to think —?"

Savvo laughed. "No, nothing bad is going to happen to you, friend. I mean, not to you personally. But it doesn't hurt to drive carefully anyway, to stay in the habit. See you."

He took his cycle and his backpack and his pass and went through the main gate and pedaled slowly along the lane leading to the Towers.

In an office very near the inner sanctum, a Dr. Partland questioned Savvo for nearly an hour. Then Partland wrote a report on the interview. The report concluded:

> Although the subject has displayed more than minimal precognitive power, his paranoiac preoccupation with a forthcoming irreversible end-of-world disaster of some unspecified kind renders him unfit for Team work.* His application is hereby rejected.
>
> *He is evidently a flameout, his illness having already occurred in private life, and not as a result of service with the

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Perfect Safety Council.

Even after finishing the report, Partland could not put the strange man who called himself Savvo out of mind. It was unsettling, all that talk of stretching the fabric of probability and the penalty mankind would have to pay for having misunderstood the nature of calamity. At one point in the interview Savvo had showed his hand, let his true purpose be known. He wanted to wreck the whole project. Had he been allowed to join the Team, he would have been satisfied with nothing short of stopping the work in the Towers. And that of course could not be done. There was too much at stake. Too many hopes, too much money, too many careers. Why, in Partland's own case ....

Dr. Partland called a small, informal staff meeting where it was decided that Savvo must be found and detained. He was authentically insane, and so having him put safely out of the way should be no trouble. And it certainly wouldn't do to have him going around stirring things up, making people lose confidence. What if he went to Washington and bent the ear of some bureaucrat? Crazier things had happened and the man was very convincing, as madmen often are.

The order flashed out of the Towers to all security officers in the vicinity. A complete description of Savvo was given along with the information that he was dangerous, to be taken by force if necessary, alive or dead (the death not to be counted as a preventable accident).

A search was mounted which went on and on. Incredible that Savvo couldn't be found immediately. How many blind bicycle riders were there to choose from, anyway? And even if he'd hitched a ride, he couldn't have got very far across the desert before the alarm was broadcast.

But Savvo had evidently foreseen the search for him, and had countered by devising some way to thwart the perfect security of these perilous times. Perhaps by now he and Hank Withers were crossing Baffin Island by dogsled, knowing motorized travel would soon be obsolete, with no fuel to be had in that disastrous, catastrophic, calamatous, all-too-imminent future when Savvo would be proved right.

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MANGLED MOORCOCK

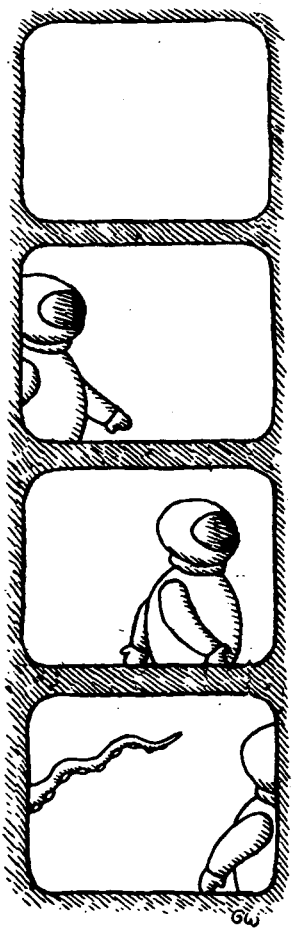
It is so seldom that a work by a writer from *within* the field of sf is brought to the screen (quick — how many can you name?) that even when they are mucked up, as almost invariably happens, one wants to spend a little time analyzing what went wrong and making rude noises about film producer's mentalities. However, in the case of *The Last Days of Man on Earth* (I think that's what it's called; somehow, it's not one of those titles that sticks in the mind — or rolls trippingly off the tongue, for that matter), which is the screen version of Michael Moorcock's *The Final Programme*, I'm not even sure I'm up to analysis or rude noises.

Frankly, I haven't read that particular Moorcock opus (I'm sure that there are people who have read *all* of the prolific Mr. Moorcock's works, in fact I even know one, but it takes a certain tenacity that I lack); but I regard him as an amazingly inventive, if sometimes oversuperficial, author, and I can't believe TLDOMOE does justice to it. Certainly as a film, it is an almost unmitigated disaster.

Well, I can but try to give you a taste. As civilization collapses

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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(which we gather only from overheard newscasts and one shot of Trafalgar Square being used as an auto junk yard); Jerry Cornelius races about the globe trying to retrieve some microfilm of his late father's work, which would provide the final program for the linkage of an ultimate computer and a lot of pickled but active brains of deceased geniuses. He is accompanied by a Miss Brunner, an omnisexual and deadly lady whose bed partners tend to vanish. (In the only funny line of the film, Jerry says, "What I want to know is what you do with the bones.")

Miss Brunner and her squad of superscientists want to blend all these ingredients to develop an instantaneous superperson — I use "superperson" not only to pacify the activist females among my readers, but because this creation is to combine male and female (and everything else but the kitchen sink) and save the world.

Finally the shopping list is complete, and Miss Brunner and Jerry are put together in a solar oven to mate and bake at the same time. They coagulate into an ending so inane that you will want your money back even if you wait and see it on television. The whole thing is produced a la James Bond out of "Clockwork Orange" and is hip, pop, and mod, i. e. dated as hell at this point in time.

Come on, filmmakers — all we ask is an expertly animated version of *The Stealer of Souls!*

The film I had most fun at this month is peripheral, but worth mentioning. The subject of a great California earthquake has been used by many authors in the genre, and it is still speculative ground (at least as I write this, it is). So allow me a few words about *Earthquake!*.

You know the premise — I mean even if you've been in Afghanistan for a year and haven't read a word about the film, you know the premise. There's this mixed bag of people, right? And you follow the dreary course of their lives for a little while and then, wham! — there's a disaster. Now of course the people aren't important at all to the film, except that there's got to be somebody to be affected by the disaster. So there's no real point in talking about the acting or actors or dialogue or plot with this kind of movie; it's the disaster that counts and how well it's carried off. Well, it's been a long time since we've had such a whangdoodle disaster as the one in "Earthquake!" It's really a winner, and the added gimmick called "Sensurround" is one of those rare gimmicks that works. The closest equivalent I can think of is being on the lower level of a subway station when a train

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Jon Fast was born in 1948 in New York City. He attended Princeton University, Sarah Lawrence College, and he recently returned from South America where he wrote additional dialogue for a Dino di Laurentiis film, "Turn the Other Cheek." He lives in West Hollywood and is presently working on a screenplay and a novel.

Decay

by JON FAST

I must have waited an hour before Fabrozzi would see me. I sat in the hall outside his study, on one of those French loveseats that are more comfortable to look at than to sit in. The wall facing me and the wall behind me were enormous mirrors reaching all the way to the high ceiling overhead. They reflected me and the love seat and each other a million times, like the mirrors they used to have in barbershops, and I passed the time trying to count my duplicates. It was a weird way to decorate a hall, but Fabrozzi was a weird character, a brilliant lone-wolf inventor in the tradition of Ford and Edison, a shrewd businessman, and something of a con artist. At least that was what the dossier said, and I'd had the whole PR department of Global Airways at work on it for nearly a month before I left L.A.

An elegant man in his fifties came out of the study. He wore white slacks, crepe sole shoes, and a sports shirt open at the collar. I stood up and we shook hands. He said:

"You are Mr. Carlyle from Global Airways? Come to steal the work of a lifetime for a song and a smile?"

"We're prepared to offer you a little more than that," I said, trying to keep things pleasant. It wouldn't be easy. "I was admiring your mirrors."

"I'm pleased you like them. They are a new addition to the house — in honor, I might add, of the Instant Transport. You see, the mirrors, or, more accurately, the concept of the mirrors, supplied the final piece to the puzzle." I followed him into the study as he talked. He was so absorbed in his explanation that I could have stayed on the love seat and he wouldn't have noticed.

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"The Instant Transport has been possible for years," he continued, "ever since Zukowsky discovered the principle of molecular transmission. In fact, a Russian scientist working from Zukowsky's monograph developed a prototype instant transport in 1982, but it had one serious flaw. After the object — I believe he used a rabbit — had been transported ten times, it began to show a loss of detail. The fur became a solid coat, the nostrils disappeared, the irises fused, and so forth. After ten more transmissions, the rabbit was a smooth white ball, and quite dead. I believe that Russian scientist was forced to continue his researches in Siberia.

"This loss of detail is comparable to that which occurs when a photograph is copied, and the copy is copied, and the copy of the copy is copied. The copy must be less perfect than the original, the copy of the copy even less perfect. Thus the loss of detail, the decay, so to speak.

"The Instant Transport only copies in the sense that it records the topography of the image to be transported, and transmits it to the receiver for use as a sort of template for reassembling the molecules. Take care of the topography...."

"And the insides take care of themselves," I said.

Fabrozzi smiled at me with new respect. "You have read Zukowsky, I see."

"I try to keep up with what's happening," I said.

He continued: "The template quality posed the problem. Even with the highest state-of-the-art circuitry, all objects, living or otherwise, began to show chronic loss of detail after ten or, at the very most, fifteen transmissions. The problem seemed to have no solution.

"One night, after mulling over it for hours, I dreamed I was once again a child having my hair cut, staring at the barbershop mirrors, at the image of myself that seemed to repeat infinitely without a perceivable loss of quality.

"And there I had the answer. Laser beams and reflectors — plus the latest advances in holography and twelve years of experimentation."

"So you did it all with mirrors," I said, trying for some levity. Fabrozzi didn't crack a smile. Quickly I continued. "And now you have it perfected?"

He nodded and led me to what looked like a stall shower standing in the corner next to a blue Ming vase on a marble-topped table. Then he pointed out the window at an identical stall shower set about a hundred feet from the house, in the middle of an apple orchard. He

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went into the stall shower and shut the door behind him. Despite the fancy trappings, I felt like I was watching some two-bit magic act. Next I heard a voice calling my name, and I looked out the window, and there was Fabrozzi standing in the apple orchard. I opened the door of the machine in the study; it was empty. I closed it, and a moment later it was opened from the inside by Fabrozzi. I ran to the window, and all I could see were apple trees and the duplicate machine.

It was one thing to read about the Instant Transport in some cold black-and-white dossier; it was altogether something else to see it with my own eyes. I could feel my scalp start to crawl. I sat down.

Fabrozzi said, "I suppose you know, Mr. Carlyle, that Pan Am and TWA have already offered me substantial sums for my invention. Please do not insult me."

"I've been authorized," I said, "to go no higher than twelve million dollars."

Fabrozzi snorted and gave me a look of pure contempt.

Six hours later, I was on a plane back to L.A.; Global Airways was twenty-five million dollars poorer for my visit — and two shower stalls richer.

It was the first evening Brenda and I had had alone together in two months. I had been working round the clock on the Instant Transport campaign; she had been on location in Mexico shooting a commercial, then on a modeling assignment in Frisco, and another in Miami.

During the early days before I took the job at Global, the days when I still thought I had it in me to write the Great American Novel, we had spent every minute together relishing our mutual disappointment. I resented her for not being the sex queen I had been promised before our marriage; she resented me for not being able to make a living.

Now her half-naked body sprawled across a sixty-foot billboard on Sunset Strip advertising some kind of tanning lotion, and I brought home a hundred and fifty thousand before taxes, and once a month or so we spent an evening together trying to be nice.

That night, Brenda was making the most of it, wearing her hair down, and the beige evening gown she knew was my favorite. We had brandy in the living room, and I told her about the campaign, laying the groundwork for the surprise I had planned.

Market research, I explained, had warned us that people wouldn't trust the Instant Transport. They were afraid they'd lose their souls through molecular

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transmission. Souls! As if people had souls any more, in this year of our Lord 1989. Superstition clings to the human race like a barnacle. The problem was to convince them that no harm would come after hundreds of transmissions, that the Instant Transport was indeed the quickest, safest, and most economical means of motion ever devised by man.

We'd hit on a plan. Five hundred and four I.T. booths would be set up, one in each major city of the world. Then someone whom the public could empathize with would transport eastward from booth to booth all the way around the world and back to where she had begun.

Yes, *she*. There's an old axiom of PR work; Nothing succeeds like a beautiful woman. Her seven-day journey would be carried on all the major networks. And Global Airways would herald in the age of Instant Transport.

"I have a surprise for you," I said. "Benson suggested you be our traveler."

"No," Brenda said immediately.

"No? Seven days of media coverage and eighty thousand?"

"No. That machine frightens me. Suppose something went wrong and my head came out attached to my elbow. What then?"

"I see. That's what you're afraid of. Ruining the body beautiful." I tried to keep my voice level. I'd tried hard to get a piece of the gold mine for Brenda, and I was angry that she wasn't jumping for it. "Well, nothing can go wrong. We've tested the I.T. hundreds of times, and it's foolproof. You'll come out the same cold gorgeous bitch you went in."

"Mitch," she said, "please don't start. It's been such a nice evening. What I'm really afraid of ...." She paused to sip her brandy and continued. "I'm afraid my soul won't make it along with my molecules. I'm one of those old-fashioned people, you see. Superstitious."

"And what about the eighty thousand? You made me give up my writing for less than that ...."

"You never could write ...."

"If I'd had one more year ...."

"We'd both have starved to death."

"You bitch! I laid my job on the line so you could be our traveler, and you're goddamned well going to do it!" I took a minute calming myself down and added, "It's my anniversary present to you."

"Is this our anniversary?" She giggled. "What a kind and thoughtful husband you are."

Harry Wells was my oldest and best friend. We had met at

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Stanford nearly ten years ago; I was keeping out of the war in the Philippines, and he was finishing up a biochem doctorate. After graduation we went our separate ways; then a couple of years later I ran into him. He had sold out to Revlon, I'd sold out to Global. We found that hanging around each other eased the sting. It's always comforting to find someone else who's done the same rotten thing you have, makes you feel like it can't be all that bad. So we spent a lot of time together.

That night we were loaded. We'd polished off a bottle of Scotch, and Harry was inside getting another while I fiddled with the TV trying to clear up the reception. With all the technological wizardry of our age, satellite TV transmission still looked like a blizzard. I knew from the schedule it should have been Istanbul, but the screen looked like the South Pole.

Harry came in and we started the second bottle. Through the snow I could make out the I.T. booth and an NBC news commentator standing next to it, looking a little anxious. Great for the image.

"Why doesn't the idiot smile?" I asked Harry.

"You're not grinning," he pointed out. "How's he going to look if this wonderful stepsaving device ...."

"Shhh! It's time."

The door to the booth opened and a snowy Brenda stepped out. She looked okay. The news commentator went into his spiel, and I relaxed — for fifteen minutes anyway, when she'd have to reappear in Ankara.

"Harry," I said, "I'm decaying."

"Eh?" Harry said.

"My ethics, my morality. I made her do this. She didn't want to. I made her feel so rotten she'd have to do it. Who the hell knows what's going to happen to her in those damn machines."

"I thought you'd had them all tested."

"Yeah. But not five hundred and four times. Nobody's ever been transported five hundred and four times. I made my wife risk her life for *my* job. I'm decaying."

"Well," Harry mumbled, "don't feel too bad about it. Everything decays. We're born, we start to decay. It's a law of nature."

"Not everything."

"Everything."

"No, that's not what Fabrozzi said."

"Fabrozzi." Harry snorted. "I know that guy Fabrozzi. He came to Revlon, maybe five years ago, said he had a way to stop aging, take the poisons out of the bloodstream. And he did too. That

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was the funny thing. He'd actually perfected a way to remove aging toxins from the bloodstream. But the side effects of the treatment completely destroyed the natural immunization of the body. Our test group came down with everything from German measles to cancer during the first month of treatment. Of course, Fabrozzi didn't bother to mention the side effects. Left them for us to find out. Irresponsible S.O.B. No integrity."

"Like us?"

"All right, if you insist on beating yourself. Now tell me, what did the great Fabrozzi tell you about decay?"

"Mirrors ... you know? Like they used to have in barbershops, mirrors that reflect each other. He said the images don't decay."

Harry was staring at me over his glasses, like I was some rare species of shill he'd never before encountered. Defensively, I continued:

"I stared at those damn mirrors for an hour, and the reflections looked perfect to me. That's the principle he used to perfect the I.T. Of course, I understand there's a little decay, but it's infinitesimal. Damn it, what's so funny?"

Harry was laughing hard, and his words came out in short gasps. "I love you, Mitch ... but you're an idiot ... Fabrozzi took you for a ride ... a twenty-five million dollar ride ...."

Then Harry stopped laughing. He slapped his mouth and whispered through his fingers, "Jesus, what about Brenda? What'll it do to Brenda?"

I ran up close to five hundred dollars in phone calls that night calling Tabriz and Teheran, Meshed, Kushka and Kabul, but the momentum of a campaign such as I had devised was not to be stopped. I explained, I pleaded. Some of those tinny telephone voices thought I was an anti-progress crank, others must have known who I was ....

But who was I? A no-account junior exec with cold feet. A glorified messenger boy who hadn't been content with just selling himself.

So I sat in front of the TV, helplessly watching Brenda reappear in Peshawar and Rawalpindi, Sialkot, Jullundur, Ludhiana, Saharanpur and Delhi, straining to see through the snow, to see if she had ... changed.

Global kept Brenda under wraps, even from me. When she didn't appear at the press conference, Benson, who was next above me, gave some half-assed excuse about her being unavailable because of physical and psychological testing, but assured the

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press that she looked fine and was in high spirits. To me, he said:

"Mitch, baby, just sit tight. We ran into something we hadn't counted on. You'll have your little woman back in three days, a week at most."

It was the longest week of my life.

She called me on the phone first. It took me a minute to recognize her voice; instead of the steely politeness I'd come to know so well, she was high and shaky, like a frightened little girl.

"Mitch, I did it for you."

"I know you did, honey."

"All those bad times ... all the fighting, picking scabs off old sores ... do you think we could, I mean ... I loved you once."

"Don't talk now. I'll be over there as soon as I can, and we'll talk then. Phones aren't good for feeling."

"Wait! Mitch? One thing, please. Mitch, I won't be able to work any more. I'm finished as a model. You're not going to want me the way I am now, and there's nothing they can do to fix me, but — Mitch — promise you'll let me stay for a while, and you'll take care of me until I can figure out a way to take care of myself. Modeling's the only thing I've ever known, but I've got a good brain, and it wouldn't take me long to learn something like ...."

"Brenda, I'll keep you and love you and take care of you until I'm so old I can't hustle a buck any more."

Before I hung up she said, "Don't make any promises until you see me."

I parked behind Global's main office building in downtown L.A. Benson told me he would have her waiting in the stock room so we could leave the back way without anyone seeing us. It was tactless, but I suppose from Benson's point of view it was also good business. He met me outside the door, shiny and slick, as if he'd just come off the Global young-executive-on-the-rise assembly line.

"Mitch, baby, it's no good. Global's dropping the I.T. You looked over the horses, Mitch, and you put Global's money on a loser. Twenty-five mill down the drain, Mitch, baby. That's a big mistake. That's the kind of mistake that makes Global think twice about the kind of men they have working for them. Now, it wasn't my decision. No, it came from very high up. I don't like to be the one to tell you this, Mitch, but, well." He stuck a hand at me. "It's been a pleasure working with you all these ...."

I told the callous bastard something I'd been wanting to tell him for a long time and pushed my way into the stock room.

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For a moment I wondered if Harry had been wrong. Brenda looked the same, healthy and beautiful, except for dark smears under her eyes where tears had eroded her mascara. She ran to me; then I understood that it had been a trick of perspective. Harry's words came back to me: "Fabrozzi took you for a ride ... a twenty-five million dollar ride ... *mirror images decay in size.*"

Brenda climbed up on my shoe, wrapped her arms around my calf, and wept.

(*"Films," from page 91*)

goes by on the upper level; that along with the realistic visuals adds up to an Experience — and it's been a long time since a movie has been an Experience in any sense.

One added note: Charlton Heston's favorite and most oft-delivered line is "Oh, my God." Just think — you can hear him delivering it, with the jaw thrust out and the words sort of working their way forcibly around the tonsils. He said it in "Planet of the Apes" and he said it in "The Omega Man." Well, in "Earthquake!" after twenty minutes of jarring, jolting, grinding, subsonic nerve-shattering noise, there is at last blessed silence, which after a moment is broken by — you guessed it — Charlton Heston's voice saying "Oh ... my ... God." The movie would have been incomplete without it.

Literary department ... Gore Vidal's *Myron*, unlike its prequel *Myra Breckinridge*, is an authentic fantasy which is also a delight for anyone who is into old movies. Myron falls (or is pushed) into his TV screen while a '40s Maria Montez epic is being shown, and finds himself, along with a motley group of other folk, trapped on the set during the eight weeks of that film's shooting as a sort of tangible ghost from the future. Myra, whose *personna* is still present in Myron's body, determines to change the future by guaranteeing that Hollywood keeps on making the kind of movies it used to (she particularly wants a future without Sam Peckinpah) and keeps taking over. It also kept reminding me irresistably of Robert Heinlein's *I Will Fear No Evil*, with the male/female inhabitants of one body on the outs instead of lovey dovey and the sex overt instead of cutesy-coy.

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Robert Hoskins is best known in this field as an editor and anthologist (with 18-plus published anthologies). He recently returned to writing sf after a five year layoff and has sold a novel to Doubleday and this solid and entertaining story to us.

Pop Goes The Weasel

by ROBERT HOSKINS

The Golden Prince climbed the Crystal Mountain, his singing sword cutting a safe path through the poisonous needlecicles that fell from the no-pass trees. Below, the Valley of Everlasting Darkness was fitfully lit by the myriad fires started by the Metal Dragon during its death throes, but the Prince kept his attention to the road before him, refusing to be distracted. Many fierce and awesome dangers had been overcome, and now the way to the Lilac Tower was almost free of hazards. Only this final task of climbing the Mountain itself still remained, and when it was conquered, he would claim the Lilac Princess for himself — and with her, his rightful throne.

"Willie!"

The Prince paused in midstride, sword held high over his head, the bejeweled hilt clenched tight between hands suddenly slippery with the sweat of fear. Then his foot came down on a pebble, his ankle turned, and he scrabbled for balance. The needlecicles withdrew into the clumps of cannibal weeds while he struggled; then he won, and the frustrated weeds gnashed their saw-toothed leaves together, furious at losing the expected prey.

The Prince lowered the point of his sword to the ground and leaned on it, wiping his forehead with the delicate wisp of scented silk that had started him on his quest. His heart sang anew with the anticipated joys of the Lilac Princess.

"Willie! Where are you?"

A sob broke from his throat. It was no use; he had failed again. Yet he was so near....

"There you are. Willie, why didn't you answer me?"

The anodized body of the nursery robot caught the remnants of the small moon's dying rays as it glided softly into the solarium. The sealed dome of the room sparkled

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with droplets of golden light that glinted from the chrome and crystal furnishings of the room, outlining the sagging wreck of a couch and the huddled form of the youth behind it. The robot's larynx uttered the programmed soft clucks of disapproval as it bent over Willie and pried the dreamer-box from his grasp.

"Now that's enough, young man. Are you trying to scare us all out of our wits?"

Willie gave up and opened his eyes. He had been so close to the end of the dreamer — closer this time than ever before. But now the robot had the dreamer.

He pulled himself up from the cramped hiding place, a tall youngster with dark curly hair that tumbled haphazardly over the delicately etched planes of his skull.

"Go away," he said, petulantly. "Leave me alone."

"Now, Willie." The patronizing infuriated him. "We know what's best for little boys."

"I'm not a little boy!"

"Of course you're a little boy." The robot slid its hand around his arm, the soft textured plastic of its fingers warmed to human norm. "And it's way past your bedtime. Come along now. I've dialed you a nice hot bath, and then you can jump unto your 'jamies, and before you know it, you'll be safe and snug in your own little bed."

The robot started to pull him along, but he shrugged out of its grasp, then fell in behind it. Just as they left the solarium, the room brightened momentarily, the smaller moon increasing a hundredfold in intensity its emitted light. Then it was gone, the darkness supreme. But in those few seconds the suddenly harsh illumination outlined the shattered statuary and the twisted, blackened vegetation that surrounded the outside of the dome.

The lift groaned to a wearied halt a hundred feet below the devastated surface. Willie darted through as soon as the opening was wide enough and raced down the corridor, the robot calling in reproach. He reached the nursery nearly a minute before the nursemaid and dialed the lock. Then he slumped against the door, beating his fists against the cushioned paneling as the pent-up fury finally burst out.

Then a sudden explosion of small voices filled the nursery as the toys recognized his presence.

"Play with me, Willie."

"It's Teddy, Willie. You know Teddy. Hug me, hold me, Willie — Teddy loves you."

"Play with *me*, Willie. I'm more fun!"

"Shut up!" He stepped forward, kicked the head off a soldier doll. "All of you shut up!"

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Silence descended, and he looked around, fists clenched until his nails dug into his palms. The toys were silent, looking away from him. He stalked across the room and sat down on the edge of the bed.

The door clicked, twice, but did not open. The lock held, and his spirits were lightened; he hadn't been sure that the code would work.

"Willie?" It was the nursemaid. "Open the door, Willie."

He ignored the voice, getting up and going over to the small table; it was much too low for him to sit at now, but he picked up the glass of warm milk and drank it down quickly. There were two cookies on the plate, chocolate chip tonight, and he bit into one of them.

"Willie? I'll have to report this to Major-Domo. You know I don't want to be a snitch, Willie."

Suddenly there was a different voice. "William, you will stop this nonsense at once!" It was stern, authoritative, the house computer. His shoulders slumped, and he went to the bed. He would not open the door.

The choice was taken from him. There was a sudden repeat of the earlier sounds, and the door slid open. He should have known that Major-Domo would have all of the codes. The robot lumbered in, came up against the damaged soldier, and stopped to pick it up.

"Now, Willie! You know this isn't the way we treat our playthings."

"Oh, damn!"

He rolled over, burying his face in the pillows. His fists pounded the sideboards of the bed as he struck out at the enemy that he was too physically weak to overcome. Then the words broke off and became muffled sobs. The robot glided across the room and stood by his side for a moment, then reached down gently.

"Now, Willie, everything will be all right. You'll see — tomorrow everything will be cheerful again." It began to undress him, peeling off the shirt and then the shorts. "A nice hot bath and then into bed with you, and everything will be all right."

He twisted free, moved a half step away, standing naked as he confronted the construction. "What do you know about all right? You're nothing but a hunk of junk — you haven't got a soul!"

"William!"

The robot gasped. "Now you've done it, Willie! Major-Domo heard you."

"I don't care. Major-Domo hasn't got a soul, either — no robot's got a soul!

"William!" It was the unseen central computer. "You will apologize to Nursemaid."

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"Won't."

"Very well. You leave me no choice. Communicator privileges are revoked for the next seventy-two hours. All communicators are now under my personal lock."

"Now you've done it, Willie," repeated Nursemaid, but this time her words seemed tinged with compassion.

"I don't care," said Willie.

"But you won't be able to talk to Margret, or Ernst."

"So what? Margret's stupid, and half the time old Ernst won't talk to me anyhow. I've got better things to do."

But even as the words came, he knew that they were lies. His heart cried out in silent pain. Margret!

Lilac Princess!

Silent, he permitted the robot to lead him to the bathstall, but before it could start the tub, he stepped in and dialed the shower. The robot scuttled back just in time to avoid the cold needle blast that thundered from every direction, beating a harsh tattoo against the lamp-toned flesh of the youth.

Willie shivered for sixty seconds; then the spray softened and warmed to a gentle mist, ten degrees above his blood temperature. Then warm air dried him, and the robot was holding his nightclothes. The soft fabric molded itself to the contours of his body.

He permitted the robot to tuck him in. "Have a nice sleep, Willie. Maybe tomorrow there'll be a surprise."

It glided silently from the room, the lights dimming until only a soft glow came from the bathstall. The annunciator was playing a lullaby, so low that he could not make out the tune; but the hypnotic effect was working. Despite himself, his eyes were growing heavy.

Then a sob broke from him, his fingers clenching and unclenching, working over the remembered shape of the dreamer. He had found it in his mother's bedroom.

An infant's memory of a woman, soft and warm, suddenly came to him — his only memory of his mother. She was saying, "No, Willie. Little boys don't use dreamers. They can make beautiful dreams by themselves. Dreamers are for grownups."

But he wasn't a little boy, not any more. He had reached his optimum growth level six months earlier, but the robots treated him as though he were still the child who had been placed in their charge at the time of the holocaust. His own dreams had turned to nightmares of frustration.

He stiffened as a soft furriness nuzzled against his back. He groped behind him, and found the stuffed bear.

"You know Teddy, Willie. Teddy sleepy."

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The robot toy held out its paws. Cursing, he threw it against the wall. It fell to the floor with a tinkle of something broken.

He felt a momentary satisfaction, then the thing was coming back. "Teddy sleep, Willie," it whined, as it crawled over the sideboard. One leg was dragging at an angle.

Filled with loathing, he permitted the thing to snuggle against his back.

The nursery lights came on bright at seven o'clock, and the cuckoo came out of its hiding place in the pink and blue clock to announce the new day. Nursemaid appeared to let down the side of the bed.

"Good morning, Willie," it said cheerfully.

He was led through the routine of morning toilet and breakfast. The robot let him dress himself, clucking indulgently at his self-sufficiency.

But after breakfast he found himself bored. Despite his defiant words last night, he wanted to talk to Ernst — it was too early to talk to Margret. She never got out of bed before noon. The old man, however, kept irregular hours, ignoring the clocks. Sometimes he wouldn't answer at all for as much as thirty days — that was a privilege of adulthood. In his house Ernst was the master.

He sat down before the communicator, the chair too low for comfort, as was most of the furniture in the nursery. He played idly with the key panel for a minute, then looked at the robot.

"Nursemaid?"

"What is it, Willie?"

"I guess I was bad last night, wasn't I?"

"Yes, you were a naughty boy."

"I'm sorry if I said anything to hurt your feelings."

"Well..." Did the lenses of her scanners sparkle for a moment? "No harm was done, Willie."

"Do you think Major-Domo will unlock the communicator?" He said it casually, but there was sweat in his palms.

"I'm sure he will. We don't like to punish you, Willie. We want you to be happy all of the time. Someday you'll understand."

He nodded. "Yes'm."

"Why don't you try it now?" the robot added.

He touched the switch. The screen flickered into life, and he relaxed, then keyed Margret's code. The flashing red NO CONTACT came on, as expected. He keyed for Ernst.

For a moment he thought that Ernst was going to be out of contact too; but then the screen cleared, showing the old man's hairless skull, the parchment skin drawn

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tight until it was almost a part of the bone, the flesh coloring only painted on. Willie did not recognize the signs of aging.

"Good morning, Ernst," he said, following ritual. "I trust you are well."

The old man shook his head. "Not well, Willie. Not well at all. I approach the end of my days."

"What do you mean?"?"

"I am nearly two hundred years old, Willie. I might have owned another century — but the rejuvenation center was lost in the holocaust. So — I approach the unnatural end of my days. I think it will be soon now."

The boy stared, and Ernst saw that he did not understand. The whole world had died not so many years ago, but for the first time in his life Willie was facing the concept of death when he could understand what it meant to lose something forever. The prized dreamer was gone; he knew that he would never see it again.

But the idea of not-seeing Ernst or Margret was too much to accept. He pushed it out of mind.

"Ernst, tell me about the holocaust."

"What is there to tell?" The old man lifted a shoulder. The boy had not asked that question for a long time. "The world died — the universe died."

"But how could the whole world die, all at once?"

"Earth was jealous, Willie. The people on Earth resented the starworlds, for we had everything and they had nothing. Perhaps they were right to resent us. After all, we controlled our population, but our robots produced enough to feed a billion, two billion, more. Still it wasn't enough. A hundred starworlds like ours could not feed Earth's population."

The numbers meant nothing to a boy who could not remember having ever seen more than a dozen people in one gathering.

"Earth was insane, Willie — still is, if the planet survived its own foolishness. How they must hate us now. But they hated themselves as much as they hated us."

"Why didn't they leave?"

"The grid worlds wouldn't let them. It took a very long time for our grandparents to come here by starship, but they wanted a world of their own. Once here, they set up the grid and were back in communication. But they weren't going to share what they had so dearly won. They — we — were willing to trade with Earth, for the homeworld was still the technological center of the galaxy. But we wouldn't let them come here."

"That seems fair."

"To us, perhaps. Not to Earth."

Before now, Ernst's stories had told of the actual attack, of the

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release of an instantly virulent plague through the grid. The people fled, but it was too late; the plague traveled with them everywhere, striking down everyone. To Ernst's knowledge, he, Willie and Margret were the only survivors — and the children would not have been alive now if their parents had not been at Grid Central, leaving them in the care of the household robots.

His own wife had been at Grid Central and had tried to come home. But he knew what had happened. He barred the house to her, then watched her die, terribly, on the lawn. But that was one story he had never told the children.

Ernst considered Willie and Margret his responsibility. He had tried to contact other survivors, but there were no responses from any of the population centers or the scattered homesites. After he stopped trying, he turned his attention to the children, educating them wherever possible. But he could not do the one thing that would help: he could not come to their houses to reprogram the computers.

He had tried, and the failure was too painful to bear.

And now he was dying.

Suddenly he was coughing, racked with pain. His eyes bulged, and when the spasm passed he could not speak for several minutes. Willie had seen him like this before, although not for such an extended period.

"I...think we had best say good-by, Willie."

"Good-by?"

Ernst raised his hand, and the screen flashed red. Willie keyed the panel again, but got only the NO CONTACT response. He tried again, but with the same result.

"Lunchtime, Willie."

He jumped, startled, and turned to see the robot pulling the tray from the wall. He got up and changed seats, moving slowly. The robot took the tray lid.

"Eat now, Willie. It's a good lunch today."

He stared at the grayish mess; it was lumpy, congealed, cold. It did not look like food.

"Something's wrong," he said.

"What?" The robot was at his shoulder and seemed to be staring at the tray. It touched a finger to the mess, its sensors relaying impressions. Then Major-Domor spoke.

"There is a temporary breakdown in the kitchen. There will be a short delay while repairs are made."

"Oh, dear." Nursemaid clucked, and picked up the tray to return it to its slot. But it turned a yard short of its goal, rolled just that far to the left, and shoved the tray at empty air. It fell to the floor, contents

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splashing, as the robot returned to its usual station. Then there was an unusual grinding, and a cleaning robot came out of its receptacle, moving slower than normal. When it was done, there were still smears of uncooked food on the floor.

There was another grinding in the wall, and a second tray popped out. Nursemaid came to life, and this time lunch was normal. Willie ate quickly, but he was puzzled over the first upset in routine.

He left the nursery as soon as he was finished eating, for Margret still did not answer. He was bored, hemmed in by the house. He had not tasted unfiltered air, smelled things growing outside, for nearly twelve years; he did not recognize that he wanted them now.

He took the lift to the solarium, but when it stopped, the door hesitated before opening. It stayed open then, rather than closing again as it should. He wandered into the solarium, sat down at the communicator even as he looked out toward the garden. Once he had tried to break the seals of the dome, but it was impervious to him. Now he saw the wreckage of his parents' aircar in the middle of the blasted area; the car's reactor had leaked radiation that still poisoned the soil and affected the house's detection devices. Just beyond, however, greenery was trying to reclaim the garden.

The morning sun glinted off the windshield of the car, but Willie imagined that he could see the skeletons behind the glare. It was a sight so long familiar that there was no horror in it.

The robots rarely came to the solarium, even to follow Willie. Something in their conditioning seemed to keep them away; thus he was as close to privacy as he could be, even though there were sensors in every room. He keyed Margret's number and got the usual response; then he tried Ernst again — and this time the screen flashed NO SERVICE. That was the response when he keyed random number sequences. He was again puzzled.

He got up and wandered into the next room. Originally the main entrance hall, his father had turned it into a temporary storage room. Over the years some of the cartons had lost rigidity under the burden of the ones above so that now the pile slumped; one box had slipped from the top tier to crash on the floor. Now Willie realized that he was seeing over the boxes. And beyond them was a forgotten door.

He pushed around the stack, then found that he had to move a dozen cartons before the door would open, swinging out on mechanical hinges. Behind it was a closet. There was a sudden memory of people, parties, a small boy standing behind his mother's knee,

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watching as she greeted the guests.

There was another door in the back panel of the closet, and a small red sign caught his eye: he puzzled out the words slowly, for his reading ability was limited.

EMERGENCY ACCESS. Two more lines added CENTRAL COMPUTER and HOUSEHOLD SERVICE UNITS.

Willie keyed the lock, and for a minute it did not open. Then it slid aside with the sound of long disuse, and he was looking down a circular shaft that was lit by glowbulbs. Ladder rungs were set into either side of the shaft, but there was still the impression of darkness despite the lights.

He hesitated, then keyed the lock again; the panel closed, and he stepped out of the closet. He had to discuss this find with Ernst....

But there was still the NO SERVICE response. And Margret was remaining stubbornly out of contact. He was anxious to explore the new discovery, but caution made him wait. He must talk with Margret, at least.

He headed for the lift — and found then that it would not operate. The door refused to close to his order. He hit the emergency key, but without success.

"Major-Domo?"

There was silence; the computer did not answer. Perhaps it was his imagination, but it suddenly seemed cooler. He went back to the communicator — and this time it would not even come to life for him.

Willie knew that something was drastically wrong, but he did not know how to respond. He moved to the wall and looked out at his parents. The sun had shifted so that he could see their skeletons clearly. But they had no answers for him, for his questions. After a moment he went back to the emergency shaft.

There, he hesitated a moment before stepping into the shaft and starting the down climb. At twelve-foot intervals there were panels, marked with the area: he did not recognize SOLAR PANEL, not knowing that the house drew most of its power from the sun, using the atomics only as a reserve.

The second panel was GARAGE. He touched the key. There was a hesitation, as though the machinery were unused to working; then it slid back, a blast of cold air hitting his face. The cold was a shock; the house temperature normally lowered only during the evening sleep hours, and then only by six degrees.

Willie stepped out into a cavernous room that evoked a vague memory. But one object attracted his immediate attention. He knew immediately that it was an aircar.

He approached it cautiously;

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the door slid open to his touch, and he moved into the driver's seat. He touched the controls, as Ernst had instructed in a score or more lectures, and the car responded. He keyed the Forward lever then, and it rolled ahead a dozen feet before stopping as its computer sensed the closed door. He keyed it into reverse then, and it returned to the starting point.

Willie was in a state of ecstasy. He sat there for at least ten minutes, but at last he sobered, came down from his self-induced high. Still, he could not stop now: he keyed the lock panel before him — and immediately a red light began to flash on the board.

"Stop!"

It was Major-Domo, thundering in the open space of the garage. "All exterior access units are under my personal lock. There exists a state of Prime Danger. All humans are forbidden to leave the house."

Willie sat still, frightened. Then he began to relax. Major-Domo hadn't spoken directly to him, hadn't mentioned him by name.

He got out of the car and headed for the shaft again, to resume the downward climb. The chill of the garage seemed to have seeped into the shaft; he soon grew weary of lowering himself rung by rung. His arms aching with the strain, and the backs of his legs were hurting.

Then he was at the bottom of the shaft, and the panel behind him said COMPUTER CENTRAL.

Willie hesitated, was frightened. Suddenly he did not want to go through the panel. But there was no other way. The panel slid obediently aside when he keyed it.

"Stop!" It was Major-Domo again, the voice diminished in this small space. "This is a Prime Restricted Area. Admittance forbidden to all unauthorized personnel."

It was a small room, smaller than he expected. Now that he was here he felt vaguely disappointed. It did not seem right to find here nothing more than a prosaic keyboard and bank of controls. Major-Domo had seemed to be a person, a terrible invisible giant. He looked back over his shoulder now, expecting him to materialize.

But there was nothing, no one. He moved to the control panel and touched the keyboard, again remembering Ernst's repeated instructions. Then he fed in the code that would open the computer.

"Stop!" It was Major-Domo. "You are not authorized to proceed with programming. This is a Prime Restricted Area. This is a Prime —"

Suddenly there was a brief hesitation, and then the computer's voice took on a note of hysteria. The lights in the room faded, then

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came back stronger for an instant; then they went out, replaced a few seconds later by emergency glow-bulbs. A siren began to wail.

"Danger! Danger! Evacuate! Evacuate!"

Then there was sudden silence; voice and siren both cut off sharply. The control panel lights died, winking red and green and out. It was as though the life had been drained from the entire house.

Willie stood by the computer for another moment, then turned slowly. He looked around the room one last time, discovering a small shelf that he had earlier overlooked; on it were a number of items that he recognized as things that Nursemaid had taken from him over the years. The dreamer was there.

The dreamer! He grabbed it, clipped it to his waist. Then he reentered the shaft and began the long climb back to the garage.

Willie lost track of time as his body settled into a dull ache; he was used to ordered exercises, not demanding labor. When he stumbled back into the garage, he hardly noticed the cold. He made his way to the car, slumped into the seat; exhausted, he fell into a sleep that lasted more than an hour.

The cold finally woke him; it was intensifying, the temperature dropping rapidly as heat failed. It would not stabilize until it was near freezing. He shivered, rubbing his arms and legs, then closed the car door. He touched the board and the car came to life, sensors automatically turning on the interior heat. In minutes the car was at the temperature norm Willie had always known.

He hesitated a moment, then tried the car's communicator. There was still no response from Ernst, but this time Margret answered quickly. Her blonde head bobbed in the center of the screen, seeming disembodied. As always, she seemed to be slightly out of focus; there was never any image but her face.

"Hi, Willie. I'm glad you caled. I'm lonely. Old Ernst won't answer — you wouldn't answer, either. Where were you?"

She was ignoring the fact that she had been out of contact for more than a day, blaming him for not being available.

"Ernst is dead, Margret."

"Dead?" She didn't seem to understand — but he did know now that the old man was gone; they would never talk to him again.

He thought for a minute that Margret was going to ask why, but she remained silent — until he said that he was coming to her.

"Coming here? But you can't do that, Willie."

"I can. I've got an aircar. I'll be there in twenty hours."

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Suddenly she was gone. He keyed the communicator again, but there was no answer; the screen remained stubbornly blank, not even responding NO CONTACT or NO SERVICE. He tried once again, futilely.

There was nothing else to wait for; he was not going to return to the house, for it was now dead around him. But the garage doors responded to an emergency system; when he keyed the lock panel, they lifted away. This time the car rolled forward without stopping until it was clear; then it paused to wait for programming.

The house sat high on the edge of a mountain cliff, over a far away valley, nearly lost below except for the silver ribbon that was a great river. The winds were strong here, the reason that the house had been built beneath the surface. The winds now buffeted the aircar, worrying him. He wanted to get out, look down into the valley, but dared not.

He fed Margret's coordinates into the car, then placed it on complete automatic. The car moved forward and took off almost before he was ready. It headed straight out from the cliff for nearly a minute, then curved around and began following the finger of the valley as it pointed to the west.

The journey was almost anticlimax, although the sensation was almost unbearable. After descending from the mountains the car dropped until it was no more than a thousand feet above the broad plains. Occasionally they would pass over a house, a compound: evidences that there once had been extensive life on the planet.

Then, two hours over the plains and above the junction of two broad rivers, he spotted the fires in the rapidly moving dusk. They were measured, controlled; had there been more survivors of the holocaust than Ernst knew?

He reached out to change the program, then thought better of it. He would come back with Margret —with the Lilac Princess. Together they would meet those others.

The car passed over the great central ocean in darkness. Willie became aware that he was hungry, found the food control. The servitor fed him, then he dozed in the seat.

Dawn was breaking when the car crossed the far edge of the ocean, parting the broad edge of the continent in shades of pink. A short time after that, while he was eating again, they passed over Grid Central, the monolithic power towers staggering out in a spiral from the grid like some prehistoric monument to the gods.

Then they were over desert and approaching Margret's house. Willie stiffened in eagerness, bending over the wheel as though his vision

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would improve by subtracting those few inches.

The house was entirely on the surface and seemed to be made of stone slabs. The car sat down in an area just in front of the house, and Willie scrabbled eagerly out of the passenger compartment.

The desert was already hot, although it was still early; the heat hit Willie almost like a blow. He made his way to the entrance and looked for the lock panel. But there was nothing to open the solid slab of the door.

Willie stared about him, confused. "Margret?" He called her name as loudly as he could.

"Willie?" The response was muffled; he could not locate the annunciator. "You shouldn't have come here, Willie."

"Let me in, Margret. Open the door."

"No. Go away."

"Margret, this isn't funny. Open the door."

"Go home, Willie. Go back home."

"I can't. My house is dead. Ernst is dead. I don't have any other place to go."

There was another moment of silence, and then the door suddenly opened, revealing an entrance hall. Willie stepped in, peered about; the hall was dark after the bright sun outside, and it was a minute before his vision adjusted.

"Margret?"

The door closed again; he turned, startled.

"Willie?"

The voice was coming from a room just down the hall. He felt eager again as he approached her — the Lilac Princess! He was at the door when a robot glided out, stopping before him, blocking him.

"Margret, tell this robot to get out of my way."

Again there was a brief hesitation, and then the robot moved aside. Willie moved into the room, looking eagerly for the girl.

"Hi, Willie."

She was on a broad couch, centered in soft light that came from a hidden fixture. A robot stood at the end of the couch, twin to the one in the hall. She was dipping heavily bejeweled fingers into a box of chocolates, stuffing them rapidly into her mouth, hardly waiting to swallow before adding a new piece.

"Margret?"

The blonde hair was there, the face that he knew so well — bobbing on top of a gross body; layers of fat fell away from her on all sides. Her arms were nearly as thick as his body, but soft.

"I told you not to come, Willie."

She was *old;* the blone hair was a wig, askew on a head that was nearly bald. Once the face was as

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he had expected, a cosmetic sculpture that had captured an image of how this body must have looked a century ago.

She was sick, then, the result of trying to swallow too much too quickly. The robot moved in quickly to clean her, but when it was finished, her dress was still smeared, stained with old sicknesses.

The Golden Prince backed away from his Lilac Princess, wondering for an instant if he were facing another enchantment. But this was not a dream; he was no longer in the false world of the dreamer. The Margret that was before him was the only Margret that was....

He turned, moved through the hall, choking on his own bile. The door opened quickly and he was in the aircar being sick.

A few minutes later he was slumped back in the seat, staring out at the house which again showed no signs of life. He laughed, bitter; Nursemaid was right when she said that he was a little boy. He should be an adult, able to care for himself, but the robots had kept him locked in his shell.

And Margret...what should she be?

She must be happy, for she indulged herself in every way. It would be better for her if she were a child, for then the robots would be able to save her from her own foolishness. She needed a nursemaid.

Willie wished that he could go to Ernst now, but it was time to put away wishes. This was a big world for a boy alone, with no robots....

But he wasn't alone. There were the fires that he had seen last night. The fire makers were half a world away, but he still had the aircar.

He keyed the car to retrace its path. The Crystal Mountain was behind the Golden Prince, conquered, passed over. There was no Lilac Princess....

But ahead lay the rest of the world.

COMING NEXT MONTH . . .

. . ."Croatoan," by Harlan Ellison, a story which, says Mr. Ellison, "has had a most peculiar effect on those who have encountered it: I read it aloud at an evening presentation at Western Michigan University, and when the lights came up, several women were openly crying, one fled the hall in consternation; a friend who read it here in Los Angeles left my home and would not speak to me for days . . ." This is its first appearance in print; it's a moving and a shocking story that takes place in the New York City sewer system. Also: Part Two of Robert Silverberg's "The Stochastic Man," and much more.

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A wildly inventive tale of foreign and domestic intrigue from Doris Buck, who writes: "The horrifying climate part is right out of *Fortune*, a nightmare that may come true ("Ominous Changes in the World's Weather," Feb. 74). The rest is a free fantasia on THE SECRET LIFE OF PLANTS and the not so secret life in Washington."

Please Close The Gate On Account of The Kitten

by DORIS PITKIN BUCK

There isn't a kinder man in the whole Washington Metropolitan Area than the Director of the Central Control Board. Maybe not a kinder man anywhere in all the fifty-nine states. I should know, shouldn't I? He's my boss. Just because everybody clams up if you talk about what goes on at the CCB, doesn't mean anything against the research men, least of all that we're vicious. Why, every time I go into the grounds I check to make sure the gate's closed. Not that I give a hoot about the damned kittens, but I'm civilized, a guy who'd rather not hurt a living thing. You got that about me soon as I came in, didn't you, doc?

Now that we've settled the financial preliminaries, how about bringing my girls into our talk later? For instance Pam was cute but only part of my problem. I'm asking because I've never been to a shrink before, and don't know the ropes.

Everything I say here is confidential — right? Files aren't burgled any more. I needn't side-step about the greenhouse. Pam once tried to ask me leading questions, but she wasn't too good at it. No Mata Hari, or whatever the chick was called.

When I walked out from among the pots and plants one day, I wondered if I'd ever get to first base. I was an R & D man who hadn't come up with results. Even with my mind on my reputation, I noticed it had been raining. I stepped carefully to avoid puddles.

Think a few inches of water in the middle of the path could frighten a grown man? I tell you I could have been a kid. I stared at the reflections of the clouds while my hands got clammy. I was goose-pimpling with fright. For what lay in front of me was an underfoot sky, bottomless except for odd-shaped clouds. I'll hate

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long, stringy clouds till they drive me off in a hearse. That sky began to creep toward my feet. If I'd taken one step, I'd have started to drop — drop into a screwball pocket full of those clouds.

Have you ever looked into emptiness, doc, with your stomach coming up where your throat ought to be? Right there I began to sway. Then the dizziness passed because I made such an effort to pull myself together. I wiped the palms of my hands. Under my breath I was saying to myself that everything was A-OK. No, better than OK, because for months I'd been trying to invent a Sensation Scrambler!

I only half understood scrambling then. But I knew I'd stumbled onto something big, and my plants were the key. They were giving me results of national importance, as good as the Manhattan Project of World War II, but different.

Next day the puddle was still there, shrunk a little. I knew I was acting silly but I gave it a wide berth. You ought to have seen me skirting round. If you'd once looked at what I saw, right where you were going to put your feet — Get the idea, doc?

Of course after what happened, I went all out for being careful. I'd hate to risk more scrambulation. So instead of trotting around the greenhouse, I worked in another building. Assistants put electrodes on the leaves and turned on the current. Of course I guarded my men from any danger as best I could. You get fond of the fellows round you. I never used the same guy among the plants two days running. I saw to it that they had polished onyx eggs to stroke, the kind executives use. I have one myself though the boss is inclined to give minerals the go-by.

I've seen him walk into his office, pick his kitten up, and start a long steady stroking from behind the ears right to the tip of the tail. Sometimes I thought the cat was pretty nearly hypnotized. Sometimes I wondered if the director was. He always said for ironing out kinks when a man's nervous, give him a live cat any day, any time. I never tried it personally though sometimes I've dreamed I was petting one.

You want to hear about the dream cat? Well, it was always grey, rather like the one you keep here. Why did you lift your head that quick way and start looking at me? I hope your cat doesn't have the same sneaky sense of humor as mine. The grey dream cat often pretended to be asleep. As you walked past, out shot a claw and fastened in you. A custard pie type of joke. It was always off and away before you could hit it. Most felines are frustrating.

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Pam had something in common with cats. It's how she moved. For a long time I never ran into her though I heard about her now and then. I was too busy for personalities, too occupied with the flow rate of sap in a stem and whether it correlated with plant emotions, if any.

Of course after what happened by that bit of rain water, I changed my technique with all my specimens. I'm allergic to unnecessary risks. So instead of hurrying around to record electric pulses and make on-the-spot notations about possible hostility and negativity, I worked in a different building. My assistants carried on with the leaves electrodes, and currents. Of course I guarded my men from any danger the best I could. You get fond of your co-workers. That's why I never sent the same guy among the plants two days in succession.

A girl as pretty as Pam can take your mind off that kind of worry. She did the very first time I ran into her. She was loitering near the gate, outside of course, reading the kitten sign. Now it isn't healthy for anybody to stay near that entrance long hours on end. Someone from the CIA's likely to pay a call on you, claiming he's checking on the neighbors. It's awfully hard to get rid of that sort of caller. From the minute I set eyes on Pam I felt bigger than myself. I kept thinking of ways to protect her, spang off. No unwanted callers, just me. She was an ego-expander, that girl.

Now, doc, not every pretty woman's got a pretty voice. But Pam has, with laughing water effects. Her hair has three colors that blend. It wasn't till I'd known her a fortnight that I even noticed her smile. A teeny bit lopsided. I never saw anybody before with a mouth that tried to edge off her face. I'm a believer in signs, myself. "Harry, old buddy," I remarked inside my head, "right here is a woman who may be attractive but won't come up smiles all the way. Lay off her."

Did I? Hell, no.

Brenda never got to me the way Pam did, never, any of the time. Brenda was the dame who told me, "Harry, you're all of six feet. Nothing's the matter with your features, your brown hair or your grey eyes, except they're a bit narrow. How come I could see you in a crowd and never look your way twice?" That was when I was dropping her for Pam. Oh, well, she went off with what's-his-name. Really wonderful timing, like a theater cue.

Brenda was rather high-ranking. I never told her I was a busboy once at an inn near where they raised horses. Got enough to clear

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out and reach the city by betting on a fixed race. My first leg up. I'm way beyond that now.

I can guess what you're thinking: *If you're so clever why aren't you rich?* Give me time, doc, and I'll be a millionaire. And, anyway, I came about something different. It has to do with women, and so I'll tell you about Muriel, the girl before Brenda.

Muriel went on holiness jags. I used to enjoy watching her face get goofy while she listened to preachers, and I planned to take advantage of her reaction at bedtime. One time I was captive audience for a swami Muriel discovered, and I heard him hold forth on the old theme of how all life is One, capital O yet. That Hindu could go along nonstop for an hour on influencing plants by love and music beats and village dancing. Our little green brothers!

I was holding a yawn back in my throat when — whammo! — my big idea hit me. I saw a reversible reaction. If we could influence plants, why couldn't they be persuaded to influence us — after a little prodding from me? Or maybe right now they do it when we don't notice. I reminded myself how people talk about communing with nature. I wondered if plants had developed techniques of their own through the ages. After all, like the American Indians, they were here a long time before us.

And why — here's the nub of my idea — why concentrate on teaching them love? In this big wide beautiful universe, you can do quite a bit with hate. I didn't really understand as much as I would later, but even then I got a happy feeling.

I was brooding over emotional transfers and memory when it came to me that Muriel was talking. She wanted a lot more attention than a busy man could give. That woman kept asking for compliments: when she cooked a meal, when we waked up, when she had on a new dress. She even said, "Harry, I'll know you love me, know its for real if you pay me an honest-to-gosh compliment without my urging." Dames! But she'd have lasted longer if Brenda hadn't come into both our lives. I would never have expected Muriel to break so many plates during that quarrel — our first and only. I got disgusted. In a way she lost me. I lost her too.

After we'd parted, I still thought about the swami's teachings. I added them to my own experience with those reflected clouds after the rain when I'd been working on the Scrambler. I got an inkling finally of how to perform a small hate experiment.

I concentrated on a crook who gave me dope about races. He never actually made me lose money, but if

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he'd been straighter, I'd have made a whale of a pile. I tell you, doc, all a man's life he remembers money he might have made. He remembers, and is he sore!

I took my peeve out on a begonia. I'd half break a stem and leave it dangling. Afterward my assistants, following directions from me, would fasten electrodes to the leaves and turn on current. I had them make recordings, of course. Most plant experimenters get a rhythmic curve. They got something like a stock market chart during a war scare.

Soon, that begonia registered emotion whenever my men got close. Presently it reacted when they walked into the building. At last they showed it to the crook and let him yank off a leaf. I'll bet that to a plant, bat-blind because it has no eyes, two or more people register as one — in this case The Torturer. The begonia started to wilt. They reported it. Right then I got a girl to nurse it back to health. When it was covered with blooms I had it sent as an Easter present to my tipster. It was left at his door with a pleasant note from me.

Remember this was all a test of my theories. I was as curious as the next man to know what would happen.

This dopester got involved in a traffic accident. His sensations misled him. The lights confused him. His explanation to the cop was so weird he found himself in St. Elizabeth's with other mental cases. I never followed up on what happened to the man.

While that occurred, I had plenty on my mind — for one thing, Petrov. The director told me all about him, showing me the Petrov files from the State Department. After we'd gone through them he summed up his feelings: "Beware of a peasant genius." I nodded.

This Petrov was using his scientific weight, which was considerable, to push his government around. He pressured them to use the Lena, the Ob, and the Yenisei — you know, rivers in what was called Siberia before the Asian War. That northerly land is drought-prone. He wanted it irrigated. Does that sound big-hearted? It could hardly be more devilish.

Here's why: He's cutting off a massive source of fresh water from the Arctic Ocean, into which these rivers empty. If you don't see what happens, doc, I'll tell you.

The ocean, being salt, no longer freezes in winter. Curiously enough that lowers global temperatures. Paradoxical, but it's so. Check it. Then North America chills and gets drier, an ugly condition for our wheat industry. The new hybrid heavy-yielding varieties are spe-

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cially tender. I'm a plant man. I know. While Petrov's crunch is on — and that might be forever — farmers go broke, commodity markets do nose-dives, and this country of ours starts to go down the drain.

The dossiers also mentioned a climate interference project involving the monsoons. Sheer ruin for an entire subcontinent if they damp their rains into the sea. That idea might be workable, might not.

Ever thought much about starvation, doc? When I touch on that subject, I — well — shudder, like I did at the slinky clouds.

I heard my director say, "We're the Haves." He tapped his desk. "Want to be a Have-not, Harry?" I was thinking over such an idea at that precise point. He went on: "As of now our country's on the top of the heap. We want to stay there, you and I. I count on myself to locate dangers. How would an R & D man deal with them?"

"By Sensation Scrambling," I shot back.

He gave me an odd look. "Plenty of fellows on the government payroll are in no hurry to produce results. They have their faces in the federal trough. Sometimes it's years before they surface. This Petrov — this Renaissance man, if you understand me — is over here now for a scientific congress. The congress is a break if we take advantage of it. But we need a speed special." His eyes held mine. "Any *real* results on your project yet, Harry?"

"I think I can come up with something of interest. If you like, sir, I'll describe it, though talking of it at this stage may simply show up an important gap. That's why I've waited to mention it."

When I want, I can talk the boss's lingo. I filled him in. I laid it on thick about plant emotions, memory in the animal and vegetable kingdoms, information transfers. I even postulated meditation in depth. Jesus K. Christ, I could almost have been a guru!

The director was pleased. He gave me the go-ahead sign. But he put his smart-ass finger on the one weak link in my chain. "If plants can do all this, why are some people safe? Loggers, for instance? Kids yanking stuff up by the roots? Answer that one, Harry, my boy, and you'll be the sensation of the century, whatever you do."

"Our Scrambling's no worse than a nightmare." I made my eyes, oh, so innocent. I gave the old man my best smile. I flashed it at his desk sign: PEACE HATH HER VICTORIES.

He quirked his eyebrow. He whacked my shoulder with that big hand of his. He muttered, "Hurry!"

After I'd wangled my way into

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the congress, I found this Renaissance man holding forth on his new field, predictive medicine. You ought to have heard him on the correlation between intelligence in a toddler and the likelihood of that little kid's having gastric ulcers at age fifty. I was a bright boy myself, and ulcers can lead to cancer.

He experimented with yoked rats and shocks the rodents could expect because a tone sounded in advance. After he killed his specimens he measures the size of their ulcers. Old stuff, really, with rats, but he went up and down intelligence levels, varying conditions from primates to mice to sea slugs. The whole spectrum. Thorough guy, that Petrov. No one had ever cut up so many organisms. His predictive analyses led him into some pretty rough stuff, particularly with the primates. You know, I'd hate to meet a scientist like that in a dark alley.

I never approached him directly. I simply let out how I fooled around with plants' intelligence, if any. Said I did it almost on a hobby basis after hours. Before you know it, he was asking to be introduced to me. I acted overwhelmed.

I really enjoy talking to a man who makes me think. I saw to it that in short order we were Harry and Pete. He opened my eyes to the connection between rodents and my greenhouse. That was when he branched off from ulcers onto wombs, especially rat wombs. If he had a specialty, it was cutting up rats. I could actually see the rat uterus as a red almost sensationless cave. Now get the connection between a human fetus in the uterus and any normal plant — oh, a redwood, a pond lily, you name it. Remember that in the vegetable world most of our sensations don't exist. Think from that to the environment of the unborn, from which we've all emerged.

I took the data on from there. Suppose an amaryllis that had learned to hate could cut down human sensations to its own level till the bulk of them got lost. I'll bet some plants would enjoy doing just that.

That day when I stood by the sky pool full of slinky cat clouds, I must have had my sensations sucked out of me but fast, then as suddenly dumped back any old way, everything unsorted. Who wouldn't be confused? Something with leaves and seeds had learned to reach for me psychically, the way a tendril knows how to move toward the closest support.

Presently I saw my next move with Pete like a play on a chess board. "Maybe you have something in your synthesis," I conceded, ticking off items about his rats and humans and the green world. "But I think you could do with more

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data." He bridled, as I expected. "Why not repeat some of my experiments?" I did impressive jotting while he looked over my shoulder. I gambled on his being a bit intrigued. I was right.

I made an expansive gesture. "If you want, I could loan you some of my specimens." I winked and dropped my voice. "Only never let on that I sometimes pass out government property." We had a big laugh over that one.

Of course Pete needed electrodes. He made that plain. I supplied everything he wanted, while he speculated. "Tonight I'll see if a plant develops special powers when electricity is turned on. That may step up its activity. We'll see. We'll see."

Right there he put his finger on the one step I'd failed to understand. Pete had brains that were worth picking, and he was game to offer a little to get a little. We two got chummier by the day. We were often out together, and I remember — will I ever forget? — the sound of ice clinking in our glasses while we discussed what he'd done with his jungle, the one I'd supplied. That bastard had a high degree of inventiveness. The ice clinked and clinked under our talk.

Before long Pete paid attention to it. He confided in me. "I prefer not to fly home with my colleagues. Planes frighten me. I go by ship. Perhaps see icebergs." He twirled his drink. "But sea ice would not make this tinkling."

"Sure wouldn't," I answered. "How are your experiments going with all that stuff I loaned you?"

"Oh...fine." He spoke so absently that I knew something was working on him. He diddled those ice cubes, kind of leaning his ear above them. A mean look came over his face. I don't know what he was thinking. I pictured an ocean with no ice at all.

After that he rubbed his eyes as if he couldn't make out why he saw what he did. When he stopped he looked me up and down, the kind of look you give somebody new to you. He cleared his throat a couple of times before he started to mumble something. Then his voice came out loud and clear. "Hello, Captain."

After that I cleared out. Kept track of him though, sometimes through the newspapers. They played up the way a Big Brain, for relaxation, sometimes behaves like a kid, even pretending to be on a liner.

Let me read you this: "Through a nonexistent porthole Dr. Petrov sees in fantasy what could almost be a real iceberg, he makes it so vivid. Everywhere pinnacles rise over towers. Crystal ramparts extend till he has created a fairy

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tale castle for anyone who will listen. And who doesn't listen when Dr. Petrov talks? As his frozen peaks approach the ship, his tension becomes contagious."

I got a report that he'd asked, "What if the ship and the ice are on a collision course?" I could have told him they probably were. Everybody else thought his remarks hilarious. I guess I was the only one who paid serious attention to his pinnacles or the hidden seven-eighths of the berg under them. Once he came across a magazine on his imaginary vessel, and what should be in it but a real story about the *Titanic*.

You can see why when Pam made it easy for me to suggest a vacation together, that's what I did. I was fed up to the gills with everything but her. I said, "Pick the resort," and she chose the Pinnacles of Helvetia, fashionable since way back when. In my book the hotel's a dump surrounded by mountains more like sofa cushions than pinnacles.

But the weather in the Blue Ridge was heaven. We rode off on bridle paths, keeping to ourselves till the waiters thought we were on our honeymoon. That word *pinnacles* had me bothered, but I forgot it. Who'd remember anything while Pam was saying, "Let's grab all of summer, Harry."

Sometimes we cantered along the trails. Sometimes we let the horses slow down and go quietly side by side. Pam noticed how pretty pine needles were, in their little green tufts. I was thinking the very same thing. We began to plan together how different we'd make the rest of our lives, away from cities and all. A real new start.

She changed my whole world. One day she ran into the forest and stood stark naked against green boughs, her arms held out. A girl of ivory. I found myself saying, "Thank you for being so lovely." None of the other girls stirred me up the way Pam did.

That night it came on to rain. But it cleared by morning, leaving the road past the hotel full of puddles. I found myself saying out loud, "Please close the gate on account of the kitten," not that that made much sense. It was a kind of flashback, like my thinking of Petrov, who was willing to upset the whole globe.

But while I considered all that, I found my eyes flicking away from the leftover rain water. I knew I had to stare down into a puddle, or I'd never be able to look myself in the face again. So I ambled around the biggest. A lot of blue was reflected near the toe of my shoe, and I made myself stare into it, stare and stare. It was just blue sky, no window

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opened through the earth or anything. That told me I was in charge of myself again. I could brush under the rug the idea that a plant had gotten into my system and was screaming with rage while it pushed me over the brink by remote control. Boy, was I relieved!

The rain came on again and lasted for days, the way it can in mountains. Pam just laughed. She said you couldn't make her mad while they served nine-chicken-pie and spoon bread. We did a lot of walking on the covered veranda where maybe Stonewall Jackson had walked before us. The rain drummed on the tin roof, a kind of funeral march. Rain still seems to me like that.

After a couple of days I suggested we go back. Pam shook her head and laid her cheek against mine. That was before I started to count cats.

There were all of twenty-five the first day. More later. They lay on the old flooring, little grey puddles of shadow that streaked off when I got near. Some way they suggested Petrov. Sneaky son of a bitch, a killer the police couldn't touch. What can you do with a man who never thinks individuals? He thinks populations when he murders. Starving populations at that. He's a hard guy to get out of your mind.

Those damn sneaky cats were everywhere when we walked on the porch. They were wet, too. I talked to Pam about them.

My girl came back with her most reasonable tone. "Look, Harry, they have them to keep down the rats. Generally the cats live in the basement. But in a building as old as this the basement's sure to get damp when it rains. So here they are. I think they're darling." She reached down to pet one, and it backed off snarling. I was able to get a look at its teeth while I wondered if all those cats gave the rats ulcers. I wondered how big the ulcers got.

I'd hear the cats spit and yowl at night. Under their racket I'd find myself half asleep but muttering. "Please close the gate...close the gate..."

I wanted to keep Pam off that cat-infested porch. Every time I looked at her a big protective urge welled up. And I had seen something she never noticed. Those half-wild beasts were reverting.

Their mouths had grown vicious. Saber-toothed in form, though the teeth were subsized for cat jaws. I had to tell her about the danger she might run. She wouldn't buy a thing I said. Observation was never her strong point.

That night, though, she admitted we'd better leave. We would try the sea coast. She began to talk about spray on waves while I beamed with relief.

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Next morning at breakfast she started to read the news out loud. "'*Scientist commits suicide*' I hope it was no one you knew. He climbed over the side of the Chain Bridge and jumped off." She gave a little gasp and caught her breath. "A Dr. Alexei Petrov —"

"He supposed he was jumping into a lifeboat," I snapped.

"You knew him?"

"Slightly. He was going to pieces."

"No!"

"You have a theory?"

She stared in front of her. Very slowly her lips moved as if something was experimenting with them. "He...was...murdered."

"If you can back that up, you'd better call the police."

Pam began to talk incoherently, the words running into each other, still with the same effect of something experimenting but now in desperate haste. "Akillerthe Policecould Nevertouch." She moved a little, dazedly. "It was like a scream inside my head. It's stopped now. I don't know why that item about the scientist upset me so. He was no one I ever heard of."

"Don't read any details. They're probably unnerving."

She got up and pushed her chair back, quietly. She leaned across the table till her face almost touched mine. "I meant it when I talked about a new life. I was going to straighten all kinds of things out. But I don't mean it now."

That shook me. "Pam, why?"

"You killed him."

I only knew one thing to do. I got up and walked out and waited until she'd had enough time to remember we were in bed together when Petrov jumped. I wish I knew, though, how she kept suggesting things like waves and rats. If that swami was right and we're all part of the One, anything could sort of plug into anything if it learned the right connections. I'm glad nothing has the combination on me.

I never saw Pam again. She left a note saying how everything seemed to turn eerie around me, and she was through. Maybe she wasn't too much of a loss. She had a talent, though, for getting out of her clothes quick.

I've been slow getting to the point, but I wanted you to see the problem: Why can't I keep a woman interested in me? Something always comes between us.

Oh, the cats. They're not important. Not even the one at the foot of the couch, that's coming my way. At first it gave me a kind of shock, your keeping one with those primitive teeth — and in this office, too. Doesn't it make some of your patients nervous, moving round? It isn't even friendly. Suppose it bites. A man can get hydrophobia. Take it off me, will you?

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"Here comes another!"

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THE JUDO ARGUMENT

In the course of the decades during which I have been explaining the workings of the Universe, without referring to God, I have naturally been asked over and over again whether I believe in God. This is moderately annoying, and I have tried a number of different ways of answering the question, hoping to give no grounds for either argument or offense. (Once, on television, when asked "Do you believe in God?" I answered, "Whose?")

But "belief" doesn't matter anyway, one way or the other. All the hundreds of millions of people who, in their time, believed the Earth was flat never succeeded in un-rounding it by an inch.

What we want is some logical line of reasoning, preferably one that starts with observed facts, that leads us to the inescapable conclusion that God exists.

Perhaps that is not possible. Perhaps God's existence is a matter that lies fundamentally beyond the ability of man to observe, measure and reason, and must be based on revelation and faith alone. This, in fact, is the attitude of almost all the Believers in our Western culture. They wave the Bible (or some equivalent authority) and that ends the argument.

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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There's no point in arguing with that, of course. You cannot very well reason with someone whose basic line of argument is that reason doesn't count.

But you know, finding refuge in authority is not necessarily the whole answer. There is a long and respectable series of attempts on the part of impeccably pious people to show that reason does *not* conflict with faith, and that one can begin from first principles and prove by good logic that God exists.

Here, for instance, is a very simple argument for the existence of God. It is called the "ontological argument" ("ontology" being the study of real existence) and was advanced by St. Anselm in 1078. The argument is that anyone can conceive of a perfect being which we can call God. But to be truly perfect, such a being must also exist, for non-existence would be a flaw in perfection. The statement "God does not exist" is, of necessity, a contradiction in terms, for it is another way of saying, "The perfect is not perfect." Therefore, God exists.

Not being a theologian, I don't know the proper way of refuting that argument. My own way of refuting it, undoubtedly improper, is to say that as a science-fiction writer I daily conceive of things that do not exist and that even to conceive a perfect entity (such as a perfect gas or a perfect black body) does *not* necessarily imply existence.

As far as I know, there is no rational argument designed to prove the existence of God that has been accepted by philosophers and theologians generally. All the arguments remain in dispute, and for complete safety, Believers must fall back on faith.

There is, however, a certain class of argument for the existence of God that particularly interests me, and that is the argument based on science.

After all, ever since the time of Copernicus and Galileo, there has been a general feeling that science and religion are in conflict, and, indeed, many doctrines accepted by science have been bitterly denounced by Believers. The most prominent of these today is the doctrine of evolution by natural selection, with its corollary that life began and developed as a result of natural forces acting in a random way.

When Believers base an argument for the existence of God on scientific findings, they are calling upon the enemy, so to speak. It is a form of philosophical judo — the art of using the opponent's own strength against him. If you don't mind, then, I will call arguments in favor of the existence of God that are based on scientific findings "judo arguments."

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The first judo argument I know of dates back to about 1773, when the French encyclopedist, Denis Diderot, was at the court of Catherine the Great of Russia. Diderot was an open atheist who expressed his views freely. Leonhard Euler, a Swiss mathematician and one of the greatest of all time, undertook to confound Diderot by proving the existence of God mathematically in open debate.

Diderot accepted the challenge, and with the Russian court looking on in interest, Euler said, "Sir, $(a + b^n)/n = x$, therefore God exists. Refute that!"

Diderot, who knew no mathematics, had no answer, retired in confusion and asked permission to return to France.

Euler's argument was, of course, nonsense. It was nothing but a practical joke. To this day, there is no mathematical proof of God's existence that anyone of importance accepts.

Let's go on to more serious judo arguments.

Here is one that can be expressed as follows — Suppose something exists, but that it could come into existence only by defying a well-established and universally-accepted natural law. We can then argue that the fact of its existence transcends natural law. Since the only factor that has ever been admitted, in our western culture, to transcend natural law is God, we conclude that God exists.

Examples of this argument have turned up in my mail recently (and not unexpectedly) as a result of my F & SF article "Look Long Upon A Monkey" (September 1974). Several people objected to my acceptance of evolution, insisting that life could not evolve through random processes of nature, because "it is impossible to have order arise from disorder." The more sophisticated of them said something more formidable: "The concept of evolution violates the second law of thermodynamics."

To be sure, the second law of thermodynamics *does* imply that the quantity of disorder (or "entropy") in the Universe is constantly increasing and that in any spontaneous event it must increase. What's more, no scientist seriously questions the second law of thermodynamics, and if any scientific finding can be shown to violate it, that finding is very likely to be thrown out forthwith.

It is further clear that the course of evolution from simple compounds to complex compounds to simple organisms to complex organisms, represents a vast increase of order, or a vast decrease in entropy.

Combining what I have said in the previous two paragraphs, have I not

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stated that evolution violates the second law of thermodynamics and that, therefore, God exists?

Oddly enough, I haven't. The second law of thermodynamics applies to a "closed system," one that is completely isolated from the rest of the Universe and that neither gains nor loses energy in any form. It is possible to imagine a perfectly closed system and work out the theoretical consequences of the second law; or to construct an almost closed system and observe actual consequences that approach the theoretical ones.

The only true closed system, however, is the whole Universe. If we deal with anything less than the whole Universe, we run into the danger of involving ourselves with a system that is wide open and to which the second law doesn't apply at all. We must always avoid making arguments involving the second law unless we are sure that our system is at least reasonably closed.

For instance, by the second law, any object which is colder than its surroundings must warm up, while the surroundings cool down until the whole system (object plus surroundings) are at equal temperature. Yet the interior of a refrigerator does *not* warm up, but remains cooler than its surroundings for an indefinite time. In fact, heat is pumped out of the refrigerator constantly so that its surroundings are warmer than they would be if the refrigerator were not there.

Does this mean that the refrigerator is violating the second law? Since it is man-made, does this mean that man is capable of violating second law? Does this mean man can transcend natural law and has Godlike power? Or does it mean that the second law is wrong and should be discarded?

The answer to all those questions is: No!

Notice that the interior of a refrigerator begins to warm up at once when its motor is turned off. Without taking the motor into consideration, the refrigerator is simply not a closed system or anywhere near it. The motor is run by electricity that is produced by some generating system, and that, too, must be included in the system. Once that is done, it becomes clear that the entropy increase of the motor together with all that keeps it running is far higher than the entropy decrease of the refrigerator interior itself. If you take a reasonably closed system of which the refrigerator interior is part, then the second law is not violated.

Life itself is not a closed system. Simple compounds do not spontaneously become complex compounds, or simple organisms complex ones, without something other than life being involved.

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The compounds of the primordial sea, out of which life began, are bathed by a sea of incoming energy originating, for the most part, in the Sun (though, to a lesser degree, in the Earth's internal heat, in the radioactive substances of the Earth's crust and so on). It is the combination of compounds *and* energy that leads to the formation and evolution of life, and *this energy must be included in the system*, if it is to be considered as reasonably closed.

Therefore, in considering the thermodynamic significance of evolution, we mustn't think of life only — for to that, the second law does not necessarily apply. We must think of the reasonably closed system of Sun and Earth. If we do that, then we find that the entropy increase involved in the energy impinging on Earth's surface is far, far greater than the entropy decrease involved in the evolutionary changes it makes possible. In other words, the increasing order found in evolution is at the expense of a far greater increase in disorder developing in the Sun.

Evolution, therefore, once you consider it as part of a closed system (as you must) does *not* violate the second law of thermodynamics, and this particular judo argument does *not* prove the existence of God.

I am, as a matter of fact, surprised that those Believers who advance this argument (and reveal their ignorance of thermodynamics) should think the suggestion can possibly hold. Do they honestly think that scientists are so stupid that they would not see the conflict between evolution and second law if it existed; or seeing it, would be so lost in malice as to ignore it just to spite God?

A second judo argument goes as follows:

Suppose something exists, but that the chances of its having come into existence by random processes are so small (as determined by the laws of statistics and probabilities) that it is virtually impossible to suppose that it exists except as the result of the intervention of some directing influence. Since the only directing influences we can imagine involve intelligence, and since the only form of intelligence great enough to influence major aspects of the Universe is God, we must conclude that God exists.

This argument can be advanced in general terms by saying something like: "If you grant the existence of a watch, you must assume the existence of a watch-maker since it is impossible to believe that the delicate mechanism of a watch came to be through the fortuitous concatenations of atoms. How much more then, if we grant the existence of a Universe, must we assume the existence of a Universe-maker, who can only be God."

A more sophisticated form of the argument was presented by a French

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biophysicist, Pierre Lecomte du Noüy in a book named *Human Destiny* published in 1947, the year he died. Lecomte du Noüy calculated the chances that the various atoms making up a typical protein molecule would manage to orient themselves in just the proper fashion by chance alone. Clearly the chance of a single protein molecule forming by chance, even in the entire lifetime of the Universe, is negligible. From the fact that protein molecules nevertheless exist, in enormous numbers and great diversity, we must conclude that God exists.

I first learned of this argument ten years after it was advanced and, of course, saw the flaw in the reasoning at once. I pointed out the flaw in an article entitled "The Unblind Workings of Chance" which appeared in the April 1957 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction.*

Suppose, I said, we imagine not a complex protein molecule, but a very simple water molecule, consisting of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom in the following order; H-O-H. Given a quantity of oxygen atoms and hydrogen atoms, we can imagine them grouping themselves into threes at random. They might arrange themselves in any of eight different combinations: OOO, OOH, OHO, HOO, OHH, HOH, HHO, HHH.

Once they have done so, you pick out one molecule at random. The chance that it is HOH is 1 in 8. The chance that the first twenty molecules you pick out at random are *all* HOH is 1 in 8^{20} or less than 1 out of a billion billion (10^{18}). The chances are far far less if you also allow combinations of two atoms and four and five and so on — which might also come to pass in the kind of random assortment we are postulating.

And yet, in actual fact, if you start picking molecules out of a container in which atoms of oxygen have combined with atoms of hydrogen, we find that *all* the combinations, with negligible exceptions, are H-O-H.

What has happened to the laws of statistics? What has happened to randomness?

The answer is that Lecomte du Noüy, in his eagerness to prove the existence of God, based his argument on the assumption that atoms combine in absolutely random fashion, *and they don't.* They combine randomly only within the constraints of the laws of physics and chemistry. An oxygen atom will combine with no more than two other atoms, and with a hydrogen atom *much* more easily than with another oxygen atom. A hydrogen atom will combine with no more than one other atom. Given those rules, the only combination that forms in appreciable numbers is H-O-H.

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Arguing similarly, you might say that while the various atoms making up protein molecules would never form a protein molecule by absolute chance — they may still do so, if they combine within the constraints of their physical and chemical properties. They may combine first to form simple organic acids, then amino acids, then small peptides and finally protein.

By the time I wrote my article, this had indeed been demonstrated experimentally. In 1955, the American chemist, Stanley Lloyd Miller, had begun with a small quantity of a sterile mixture of simple substances that probably existed in Earth's primordial atmosphere. He supplied the energy derived from an electric spark and, in a mere week, obtained from the mixture several organic acids and, in addition, two of the amino acids that occur in protein molecules.

Since then, other experimentors, working in similar fashion, have confirmed and vastly extended Miller's findings. Some fairly complex compounds have been formed by purely random techniques. Naturally, it is reasonable to start with compounds whose formation has already been demonstrated and use them as a new starting point. Thus, in 1958, the American biochemist Sidney W. Fox heated a mixture of amino acids and obtained protein molecules (though none that were precisely identical to any known proteins in living tissue).

So Lecomte du Noüy is wrong (although I'm sure his argument is earnestly quoted by Believers to this very day). The formation of complex compounds of the kind we associate with life is *not* such a low-probability affair that we have to call on God to extricate us from the puzzle of our own existence. It is, instead, a rather high-probability and, indeed, almost inevitable event. Given Earth-like conditions, it is difficult to see how life can avoid coming to pass.

I spoke of the inevitability of life in an article which I entitled "The Inevitability of Life" but which appeared in the June 1974 issue of *Science Digest* under the editor's title of "Chemical Evidence for Life in Outer Space." (Fie!)

I was fascinated when, in response to that article, a letter of dissent appeared in the October 1974 issue, one that produced a judo argument in favor of God's existence that was better than Lecomte du Noüy's.

The letter writer did not try to talk about forming complex molecules atom-by-atom. Presumably he was knowledgeable enough about science to know that scientists have formed pretty complex molecules in little vats

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of solution over short periods of a few days. (Imagine, then, what could be done in a whole ocean of compounds over a period of a hundred million years.)

The letter writer is therefore willing to assume that the primordial ocean is full of complex molecules "with ten percent being in the form of amino acids." He calls this a generous percentage and I suspect that it is. He then goes on to say:

"Let's further assume that these molecules are combining and re-combining, making new compounds at the fastest rate known to chemistry. It's easy to prove, applying the science of mathematical probabilities that by chance, not one recognized molecule of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) could be formed, even over the billions of years normally assigned to the task."

Of course, one can't make DNA out of amino acids; we need nucleotides for that. Let's dismiss that, however, as a small error by someone who is not completely at home with the matter concerning which he is arguing. Let us suppose we start with "trinucleotides," rather complex building blocks out of which DNA is built, and out of which it can be built up by random processes.

A DNA molecule (or what we call a "gene" in genetics) may be made up of some 400 trinucleotides, and each of the trinucleotides can be any of 64 different varieties. The total number of different DNA molecules that may be built up of 400 trinucleotides, each one of which can be any of 64, is 64^{400}, which is just about 30000000000....where you must write a total of 622 zeroes!

Now let us see how many different genes are actually known and let us multiply that number as much as we can so that we have as many different molecules out of which to select that "one recognized molecule" that we must try to form by chance if we are to confound the letter writer.

The number of different genes in a human cell may be as many as 25,000. These are duplicated in every one of the fifty trillion cells of the human body, so there are only 25,000 different genes in a whole human organism as well as in one cell. Let us, however, ignore this, and pretend that every cell in the human body has 25,000 genes that are different from the genes in every other cell. The total number of different genes in the human body would then be 1.25×10^{18}.

Let's go on to suppose that every one of the four billion human beings alive on Earth have a completely different set of genes, so that no human gene anywhere on the planet is like any other. In that case, the total

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number of different human genes on Earth would be 5×10^{27}. If we assume that the total number of non-human genes on Earth is ten million times that of human genes and that they are all different too, then the total number of genes on Earth of all kinds is 5×10^{34}.

If you go on to suppose that new genes are formed every half-hour and that they are always different, and that Earth has always been as rich in life as it is now, then in the three billion years of the history of life on Earth, the total number of different genes that would have existed would be 2.5×10^{41}. If you suppose that this has happened not only on Earth but on each of ten different planets of every one of the hundred billion stars in our Galaxy and of every one of the stars in a hundred billion other galaxies, then the total number of different genes in the Universe is 2.5×10^{63}

This is also a large number but compared to the total number of *possible* genes, 3×10^{622}, the total number of different genes in the Universe, even after our impossibly generous mode of computation, is so small as to be virtually zero.

If then, you take a huge mass of nucleotide triplets and have them join at random, the chance that they will form a single "recognized molecule of DNA" in the billions of years that the Universe has existed is indeed negligible, as the letter writer states.

This is a powerful judo argument, indeed. Can we rescue ourselves by saying that the trinucleotides can *not* join in any fashion at all, but only within certain constraints that cause them to form only the genes we know?

Alas, no! As far as we know, the trinucleotides can join in any fashion whatever.

Have we, then, finally ended with an argument that proves that God exists?

Not quite!

There is, after all, a logical flaw in the letter writer's arguments. He makes the unspoken assumption that only the "recognized molecules" of DNA have anything to do with life — but there is no reason at all to suppose that.

In the course of the evolution of living things, new genes have constantly come into being; genes of a kind that had never existed before; genes with trinucleotide-combinations not hitherto encountered. These new genes were of various types from very useful to completely useless.

There is no reason to suppose that life has exhausted all the genes that

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are useful to life. There is no reason to suppose that a gene that is useless to one species might not be useful to another; perhaps to one that is now extinct or one that has never evolved.

It may be that a large majority of all the incredible number of genes that can be formed, but have never been formed, would, if they happened to be formed by accident, prove useful and functional in some life-situation, in one way or another.

We might argue that any *particular* gene has virtually zero chance of being formed in Earth's primordial ocean, but that *some* gene was certain to form. In all likelihood, it did not matter which genes were formed as long as some genes formed. The actual direction life took and the actual fact of our own existence may depend on the chance that certain genes were formed and not others. The Earthly forms of life are, as a result, purely fortuitious and are extremely unlikely to resemble any forms of life on any other life-bearing planets — but *the fact of some form of life* is a virtual certainty and does not require the defying of the laws of probability.

The choice, then, is not between a few select genes that lead to life, and an incredibly vast majority that does not. That is only the letter writer's unspoken assumption. The choice is between one group of genes that leads to life and another that leads to a somewhat different life and still another — and still another — and still another — and still another —

Once genes are formed that represent the beginnings of a very primitive form of life, a new factor enters. The genes reproduce themselves but not always exactly, so that new genes are constantly being formed, each working a little differently.

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These different genes, alone and in combination, compete with each other for existence. Survival and reproduction of this one, rather than that one, may be very largely a matter of chance, but weighting that chance ever so slightly in one direction or the other, may be the comparative efficiency of working of one gene as compared to another.

Differences in efficiency or "fitness" will inevitably lead to the survival of those genes that work best in their particular environment, and that is what is meant by "evolution through natural selection."

Genes after having been originally formed purely by chance, are then selected by blind environmental forces into a better and better fit, until after three billion years, an organism as complex and versatile as *Homo sapiens* exists. Very likely, a species equally remarkable would have been molded by three billion years of natural selection no matter what genes had been formed in the beginning by the workings of sheer chance.

Nowhere in the entire process can I see any point where the blind laws of nature definitely break down and where we are left with no alternative but to call upon God.

Naturally, there is nothing in the argument to prove that there is no God, either. Even if we were to demonstrate that, as far as we know, God is unnecessary, we have not disproven God's existence. God may be necessary at some point that we haven't properly understood, or haven't even considered. For that matter, God may exist even if there is no necessity for the existence.

However, it is a respected principle of argument that the burden of proof is upon the positive.

Therefore, if asked whether I believe in God, I suppose I must reply that as soon as incontrovertible evidence for God's existence is presented to me, I will accept it.

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Here is an unusual fantasy with a pro-football background, about Brown's running back Eldon MacDay, for whom every hard hit had a special and terrifying significance. A new collection of stories by George Effinger, MIXED FEELINGS, was recently published by Harper.

25 Crunch Split Right On Two

by GEO. ALEC EFFINGER

Eldon MacDay, number twenty-three, six foot one, two hundred and twenty-five pounds, a running back from Arizona State, realized where he was. It was a frightening discovery not merely because he was sitting at a round table in the dim private dining room in a restaurant in Euclid, Ohio. And not merely because he ought to be, really *should* be lying face down in the odd-smelling artificial turf in the new McGuire Coliseum in Cleveland, beneath a defensive end and an outside linebacker. That didn't upset him much, either; after all, the restaurant was a great deal more restful. The detail that really tore at MacDay's composure was his wife's presence at the table. His wife, Louvina. His wife, who had died over five years before. She was eating a steak, supposedly a Kansas City cut, and he could tell that it was excessively rare, just the way she always ate them. He could see the wine-red juice pooling up around the meat on her plate.

"That ain't no real Kansas City cut, Lou," he said.

"I know," she said, smiling. "I don't specially care."

"Just so's you like it," he said.

"I like it fine."

"All right." MacDay was getting more frightened. He wasn't supposed to be in their favorite old restaurant. He wasn't supposed to be in Euclid at all. But even worse, Louvina wasn't supposed to be *anywhere.*

"You sure you don't want some wine, honey?" he asked.

Louvina just smiled again. He hadn't seen that smile in five years, but it still made him feel the same way. MacDay shuddered. The waiter came to their table and

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asked if everything were all right; MacDay knew just what the man was going to say. He knew, without looking, that the waiter's shirt would be hanging out behind. MacDay stared at the tablecloth, but after a few seconds, though still afraid, he looked up. The waiter was walking slowly away. His shirt was just the way MacDay remembered.

"Are you feeling all right, Eldon?" asked Louvina. MacDay recalled that, too. The first time, though, five years ago, he hadn't known why she had asked it.

"I'm fine," he said softly. He knew that the next thing she'd say would be "Why aren't you eating?"

"Why aren't you eating? Don't you like the steak?"

"It's all right, Lou," he said. "I just ain't hungry."

"But this is a celebration, baby," said Louvina. She paused, a forkful of baked potato, sour cream, and chives held in abeyance while she looked at him, almost shyly. "You know what we be doing tonight, Eldon?"

MacDay looked startled. He stared at his wife; her expression changed to bewilderment. MacDay *knew* what they were going to do that night. He *knew*.

And just as he opened his mouth to reply, he was hit by the Comet's middle linebacker, a rookie subbing for the regular who had been hurt early in the second quarter. MacDay had been kneeling in the artificial grass, one of the Comet defensive players hanging onto MacDay's ankles, another Comet player sprawled across his back. MacDay's mind cleared slowly; first, he felt the sharp point of the football jammed into his forearm near the elbow; then he felt the cold sting of the Cleveland winter air, a contrast from the controlled temperature of the restaurant; he opened his eyes, and the difference in light from the shadowy dining room made his head hurt. Then he felt the lingering shocks of the tackle, he heard the fading sound of the official's whistle, the voices of his teammates and the Comet players, then the background moan of the sixty thousand people in the stadium. He heard the voice of the Browns' quarterback, Tom Bailess, shouting "Late hit! Late hit!" and the officials disagreeing. The Comet players got to their feet and walked toward their defensive huddle. MacDay opened his eyes wide and shook his head, then stood up and trotted to the Browns' huddle.

"All right," said Bailess, "second and seven. You all right, Mac?"

MacDay nodded. He felt a little bewildered, but you can't explain something like that to a head coach.

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"Okay," said the quarterback. "Thirty-eight Sweep split right. On three. Break!" The Browns' offensive team clapped once in unison and went into formation. MacDay was glad his running mate, Sonny Staley, the small halfback from Colgate, was getting the ball; Bailess could probably see that MacDay had been shaken up a little on the last play. MacDay was getting a rest, if he could accept blocking the Comets' two hundred sixty pound defensive end as a breather.

There was little time to think about the strange vision he had had only a matter of seconds ago. Already it was beginning to vanish, to fade in his memory. It had been only the collision, MacDay told himself; his head had hit one of the Comets, or the ground. He had been knocked out for a second or two. Now, though, while he watched Bailess set up behind the center, he had too much to think about. The quarterback, seeing the other team's defensive alignment, might decide to change the play at the last moment. MacDay listened closely to the signals; Bailess followed the Browns' digit system, calling out first the kind of formation the Comets were using on that play, then a single digit, then a two-digit number. If the digit were different than the "hut" number chosen by Bailess in the huddle, the Browns' players were alerted that a change was being made. The number that followed would indicate the new play. Any other digit would be a dummy, to keep the Comets guessing.

"Pro," shouted Bailess. "Three, thirty-seven. Three, thirty-seven." No change in the play. "Hut...hut. Hut!" On the third hut, the Browns exploded into concerted action. The Comets followed immediately. Bailess took the snap from center, spun around out of the way of the two guards pulling from their position, blocking in the direction of the sweep. Bailess faked a handoff to MacDay, who hit the line of scrimmage just after the guards ran by. Behind him, MacDay knew, the quarterback had given the ball to Staley, who was following the guards around right end. MacDay hit the Comets' big defensive end, who was trying to push him aside and get at the ballcarrier. MacDay threw himself at the man low, hitting him just above the knees. The Comet player fell forward, pushing MacDay with him for a short distance. MacDay twisted, and he saw that the defensive man would hit him while MacDay was lying on his side. "Oh, hell," thought MacDay. "Here come a shoulder separation." The man fell on him heavily, knocking the breath out of MacDay.

"Are you all right?"

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MacDay opened his eyes. His chest and back ached so badly that he couldn't catch his breath. His wife was looking at him with a worried expression. "You okay, Eldon?" she asked again.

"Sure, Lou," he said. He wasn't as upset as he had been before. In fact, he was grateful for the quiet moment, even if it were only a split-second dream on a cold footbal field.

"I said, you know what we be doing tonight, Eldon?"

"I know, baby," he said. He ate a piece of his steak. The game always worked up a terrific appetite in him.

"Well, I got a surprise for you." Louvina smiled shyly, and reached down to the floor, where she had put her purse. "I got a present for you, honey."

It wasn't going to be a surprise; MacDay knew just what she was going to take out and give to him. Still, it was sweet of her. He wanted to act surprised, for her sake. "Aw, you don't have to get no presents for me, Lou," he said.

"Here," she said. "Cause of what you got for me." She handed him a small black box. He opened it, and there was the gold ring with the garnet. He always wore that ring; the only time he took it off was before a game, when he had his hands and wrists taped. It was sitting on the shelf in his locker right now. Or, rather, the "now" he recognized; this episode in the restaurant was coded in MacDay's mind as "then." He took the ring from the box, making startled sounds and saying just the same words of thanks he had said... "then." He looked inside the band, and there were the words *Eldon & Louvina.* He put the ring on his finger.

"Don't say anything. Let me look at you."

Louvina hadn't said that. MacDay blinked, saw the bright blue, cloudless sky, heard the odd hush in the stadium, saw the faces of teammates, officials, and the Browns' team physician. "Oh, hell,' murmured MacDay.

"I said, be quiet," said the doctor. The man pointed a pocket flashlight into MacDay's eyes. "There's only a minute and fifty-four seconds left," said the doctor. "You're out of the game." He turned to one of the assistant trainers. "Get the stretcher."

"Don't want no stretcher," said MacDay. "Let me walk off."

"You feel strong enough?" asked the doctor.

"If I ain't, there has to be two guys on the bench that I can lean on. I ain't going to be carted off like some goddamn stiff." Two of the Browns' players supported MacDay, and they walked slowly from the field, up the tunnel to the locker

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room. The spectators applauded furiously, in solemn but short-lived respect for his courage. MacDay paid little attention to their ovation.

The doctor ordered MacDay to rest on a training table for a few minutes. One of the clubhouse men came with a pair of long-nosed scissors and cut the tape from MacDay's hands. Beneath the tape, on MacDay's right hand, was the gold ring, the present from Louvina. "Oh, God," whispered MacDay.

"You really hurting?" asked the clubhouse man. "I been listening in here. I heard you really got your bell rung."

"Petie, you want to do me a favor?"

"Sure, Mac. What you want?"

"You go into my locker and get my rings. Both of them, the wedding band and the garnet ring."

"Sure, Mac," said Petie. "They be on the shelf?" MacDay nodded. The other man went to the locker, and MacDay watched as he opened it and looked around for the rings. In a few seconds he came back. "Here you are."

MacDay thanked him and took the rings. He put the wedding ring on his left hand. He held the garnet ring for a moment before he examined it. It was identical to the one he was wearing. "Petie," he said, taking off the other garnet ring and handing both of them to the equipment manager, "can you tell the difference between these two?"

"Huh? No, they look the same to me. This one's heavier, I think, isn't it? No, I guess not. No, Mac, you got me. Here, this is the one you was wearing." Petie handed the two rings back.

"Okay, Petie," said MacDay. "Thanks."

"Hope you feel better," said Petie. He left MacDay and went about his own duties.

"Just a headache," said MacDay, very quietly. "And something pretty damned freaky." He waited for the doctor to come back and finish his treatment.

The sounds of the crowd came into the locker room, though muted by distance and MacDay's own fatigue. He was still charged with nervous energy, worked up in the course of a week's preparation for this first game of the season. He wanted to go back out on the field, back into the game. He felt useless, lying on the training table, listening to the play-by-play of the end of the game on Petie's radio. His whole life was geared to taking the ball from Bailess and running at the other team; everything else was wasted time. He lived alone now, ever since Louvina's death. He didn't party with his teammates, rarely even spoke to anyone

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connected with football, except in the context of the game itself, at practice or on Sunday afternoons. After the season ended, no one knew what MacDay did or where he went. That was his private business, he felt. But no one knew how empty he was, how pointless and futile, when he wasn't running the ball.

MacDay had arrived at training camp in the same manner as in the previous several seasons: unannounced, unexpected, but nevertheless precisely on time. He said little to the other team members, to the coaching staff, even to the friendly, familiar employees of Hiram College, where the Browns trained. He was given his dormitory assignment and told that he would be rooming with a rookie running back, J. D. Lieger, MacDay's first white roommate. MacDay didn't even shrug; he just wanted to get into his gear and start working.

The training sessions were hard, much more strenuous than the regular season routines. Many of the veteran players had let themselves balloon up, fat and soft, during the off-season. The rookies had no idea of the kind of work that was expected of them in the professional world. Most of the players grumbled; MacDay said nothing, and his coaches had few complaints about his performance. He was ready to play the first regular game on the morning he arrived at camp.

The weeks at training camp passed slowly for MacDay, just as they had every year since Louvina's death. He was impatient for the real tests to begin. But he never let down, even when he was worn out with fatigue and the boredom of repetitious drills.

On the eighteenth of July, about two months before the first game of the season against the Comets, Coach Jennings announced at the breakfast assembly that the team had been the victim of some petty thefts. Jennings said that he was certain that the thief was a player and that he expected that man to come into Jennings' office and apologize. The coach spoke some more about pride and integrity, then sighed and sat down. At three o'clock, just before the daily afternoon calisthenics, Jennings said that the thief had not had the guts to show up. In a low voice, the head coach said, "Well, then, gentlemen. Grass drills." Every member of the Browns' team knew what was coming; every one of them would have loved to have gotten at the man responsible. Except, of course, the guilty man himself and Eldon MacDay.

Grass drills, or up-downs, were a conditioning exercise consisting of running in place, knees pulling as high as possible, for from fifteen

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seconds to half a minute. Then Jennings yelled "Down!" and the men threw themselves down to the grass, all together, so hard that an observer could hear but one sharp smack as their bellies hit the ground. Immediately, the coach yelled "Up!" and they all jumped to their feet, running in place again, doing this over and over, usually twenty-five times. By then, most of the Browns, veterans and the youngest rookies, were hardly able to stand. Jennings would give them a couple of minutes to rest, and then go on to a new exercise.

Today, however, was something special. The coach called "Down!" forty times, then fifty. While the players were running in place, exhausted, gasping, struggling just to keep their legs moving, Jennings said they'd stop when the thief made a public confession. No one said anything. Jennings shouted "Down!" After a few more repetitions, several of the players were left lying on the ground, too weary to lift themselves up again. The count reached sixty. Then sixty-five. MacDay began to see a haze forming in front of him. He felt as if he were working in a warm, sleepy fog. The bright hot sun paled in the sky; the day darkened. MacDay was wrapped in a protective faintness, and the only outside influence that penetrated was Jennings' voice: "Down!" Seventy. Only a few players were still going. Some men were vomiting on the grass. Some didn't move at all, helpless and moaning. Seventy-five. MacDay was by himself, the last one on his feet. Jennings shouted his orders for MacDay alone. MacDay didn't know that. He was fascinated by what his oxygen-starved brain was showing him.

He saw a strange, wonderful scene around him. The grass field had disappeared. The college and the entire summer world had vanished with it. He was still running in place, jumping up and down at the head coach's command, but MacDay had forgotten that. The darkness had swallowed him up, then gradually lightened a little to show him the inside of a restaurant. He saw a table, and he saw Louvina. He saw his wife, just the way she had been on the afternoon before she had been... hurt. Nothing moved. Louvina seemed frozen, looking at him with an odd expression. She seemed so real that he could touch her. The table and chairs, the other people in the place — MacDay could turn his head and observe everything to the smallest detail — all seemed caught in a suspension of time. He felt tears coming to his eyes. He wanted to hold Lou one last time. He wanted to say something to her. He opened his mouth to speak, but

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all that emerged was a hoarse groan. His legs would hold him no longer. The light failed again, and MacDay fell to the ground.

"Ninety," said Jennings respectfully. "And down." MacDay couldn't hear.

When MacDay came to his senses, he saw that the rest of the team had broken up into squads and were working on their specialties. Someone had put a wet towel across his forehead. He thought about Louvina, about the vivid, static tableau he had entered. His body was angry with pain, but he didn't pay attention to that. He wished that he could have just touched Louvina, just a little. But he hadn't been able to move nearer to her.

MacDay remembered that first flashback as he lay on the training table, staring at the gray soundproofed ceiling. The game with the Comets had ended, and he could hear his teammates coming up the tunnel, yelling and congratulating each other. "That's one," he thought. "If they's all that easy, we gonna have a *good* time." He tried to take his mind off what had happened to him on the field, but his thoughts kept going back to Louvina.

During the previous summer at the training camp, he had never been able to speak to her. The flashbacks that he had experienced there were all exactly like the first — as though he had walked onto a stage set or an exhibit in a wax museum. Even during the preseason games, when he had three or four flashbacks during the course of each game, he was never able to break out of the paralysis that held him helpless in the restaurant. The flashbacks happened less and less frequently; it took MacDay a while before he understood what made them happen at all. At first, on the occasion of the grass drills, they were brought on by extreme physical exertion. After the first episodes, it had been four days before he had another, while he had been working at the tackling dummies.

The temperature went up over ninety-five degrees, but the coaches never noticed. They all stood around with clipboards, shouting. It seemed to MacDay that the coaches had their words written for them. Maybe they had scripts on their clipboards; one coach yelled, "You ain't gonna get weather like this, come December!" about every twenty seconds; another coach kept repeating, "Keep your head up! Head up!"; the third coach, his voice gravelly hoarse, just chanted, "Drive! Drive! Drive!" MacDay was grateful when the dark haze began to form around him, shutting out the drill.

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The flashbacks required pain, he learned. But during that stretch of weeks before the first regular game, the flashbacks were frustrating to him, for all that they gave him more incentive to work. The flashbacks cost more in exertion, as if his mind and body were building a tolerance to fatigue. If he repeated the amount of work that had given him a flashback the day before, he would only succeed in wearing himself out. He had to increase the pain. And, if he did that, all that he'd get in return was the same photographic vision. He wanted more, but he didn't know how to get it. He wanted to go to her, he wanted to touch her face one last time.

Then, that afternoon, on the field with the Comets, it had happened for the first time. He had seen Louvina move, he had sat down at the table across from her. They had talked, he had stared into those eyes that had been taken from him. He was too surprised to know what to do; still, the matter was out of his hands, it seemed, because he couldn't do anything that he hadn't done in that situation years ago. Nevertheless, he was awed and grateful. And he wanted more. He still hadn't touched her.

He had not told anyone yet about the flashback episodes. He was glad that he hadn't, now, because they seemed to be something different than he had first guessed. Working as the Browns did at training camp, MacDay could pass the episodes off as some kind of mental strain, some deficiency in diet. Now, though, the garnet ring moved the circumstance into an entirely different realm. He couldn't tell anyone, after that. The decision had been made for him. It also compelled him to try harder to visit Louvina again, as often as possible. It wasn't a dream or hallucination. MacDay knew that he was truly going back to her, back those five empty years. He much preferred sitting in that restaurant with her than doing whatever he had to in the present.

"You took a pretty good pop, huh, roomy?" said J. D. Lieger, MacDay's roommate, as he came into the locker room.

"Yeah," said MacDay. "That happens to you, sometimes."

"So I'm told," said Lieger. "I hope I get to find out one of these days."

"You gonna have to beat out some gentlemen, if you gonna play," said one of the Browns' defensive backs.

Lieger grinned. "Ain't that why I'm here?" he asked.

"Naw," said Bailess, the quarterback. "You're here so our real runners don't have to get hurt taking back kickoffs and punts.

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You're what we in the trade call 'cannon fodder.'"

"What's that?" asked the rookie.

"Look it up," said Bailess. "Hey, Mac, how you doing? We missed you."

"Didn't sound like it on the radio," said MacDay. "I'm fine. Damn doctor done forgot about me. Either I'm all right, or I'm dying."

"Let me know which before practice on Tuesday," said Coach Jennings. "Here, this is yours." He tossed MacDay the game ball. MacDay only nodded. The other players congratulated him, but MacDay just thanked them quietly, swung his legs off the training table, and went to his locker to get undressed and showered.

On Monday, MacDay relaxed in his apartment, thankful for the day off following the victory over the Comets. He watched television for most of the afternoon, then went out to dinner by himself. He had an idea to drive out to Euclid and visit their old restaurant, but after he entertained the notion for a few seconds he grew unaccountably nervous. Instead, he drove to a large shopping center, ate dinner at a mediocre Chinese restaurant, then sat in a theater for a boring double feature. He left about a third of the way through the second movie.

The week's practice began again the next morning. He reported to the stadium, and the doctor gave him a quick examination. MacDay showed no sign of injury, for which he was grateful. He had more goals to work for than ever before, and his prime objective would have to be secret from Coach Jennings and his staff. Fortunately, the reaching of that goal was by the same route as the achievement of his more orthodox aims.

If getting hit hard was what it took for MacDay to return to Louvina, to see her move and smile and speak, then he was eager to pay that price.

"Okay," said Coach Jennings briskly, "let's go in and look at the films of the Comets' game. I know that was just the first game of the season, and the newspapers have given you the benefit of the doubt. They say it's too early for the squads to have hit their best strides, or whatever those guys are saying these days. I know the game was just Phoenix, who haven't won a game since the dawning of Western Civilization. And I know that we killed them. Nevertheless. *Nevertheless,* gentlemen, I'm sure that every one of you will find something instructive about these movies. Because every one of you did something crummy. The coaches will be circulating among you, to point up moments of special

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interest, to learn your views and opinions, and mainly to make sure that none of you gentlemen are falling asleep." MacDay sat alone, and he studied the films closely; he watched his own performance, which was creditable — one hundred thirty-one yards gained in twenty-seven carries, with one touchdown. Even Coach Jennings gave him a few compliments, a rare honor indeed. MacDay watched the actions of the linemen and the other blocking backs, trying to become even more familiar with them, even more efficient a part in the machine that was the Cleveland Browns.

But the movies were a torture for MacDay, as well. He was glad when they ended, when the team went out for calisthenics and drills. He worked through these, getting the pains and aches out of his muscles. After lunch Jennings had scheduled a couple of hours of scrimmages, beginning with a light workout, no tackling, and ending the day with hard-hitting exercises. MacDay was ready to hit.

"Look, Mac," said the head coach at lunch, "I don't want you to think that I'm handing out special favors. I don't do that kind of thing. You know that. But you put out a hundred percent Sunday, and I know that you'll give everything today, too. You're that kind of player. If I had forty players like you on the roster, the Browns wouldn't need me at all. So what I was starting to say was, I want you to use your own judgment. I don't want you to hurt yourself in practice on account of the rah-rah talk I use. That's just for the other clowns, to get them to perform. If you don't feel up to working out full this afternoon, lay off a little. Forget the scrimmages. Why don't you just run a couple laps? Tomorrow's good enough."

MacDay was a little startled. To his knowledge, the coach never spoke like that to anyone; the coach had waited until everyone else had left the cafeteria before he began, so that the players wouldn't think that he was playing favorites. It had been Jennings' experience that athletes rarely understood the real intentions of their coaches.

"I'm fine, Coach," said MacDay. "I ain't even hurting none."

"You're sure?" asked Jennings. "I mean, it don't do us no good to have you being brave today and being out for Cincinnati on Sunday."

MacDay laughed. "Trust me, Coach," he said. Jennings only nodded, slapped his running back on the shoulder, and left the table. MacDay carried his tray to the service window and followed, out to the field.

The scrimmages started easy, about twenty minutes of touch-

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tackle plays run by the offense against the defense. Most of the players enjoyed this part of the workout every week; MacDay now thought it was the most irritating thing about his job. He longed to feel the hard jolt of a tackler cutting him down, or the deliberate shock as he himself blocked out a defensive player. After a while, Jennings began putting the Browns through plays under conditions more like the real game. MacDay smiled.

"All right," said one of Jennings' coaching assistants, "Mac, let's try a 20-Strong."

MacDay nodded. This was the play he had hoped for. He would take the ball from Bailess and run straight up the middle, right for the middle linebacker. Theoretically, the center would be controlling that man, and the rest of the line would be blocking straight ahead. MacDay would get no other blocking help, either from his halfback or the tight end. He would be by himself, and if any of the linemen missed their assignment, MacDay would be cut down, quickly. Bailess called the signals, took the snap, jammed the ball between MacDay's arms. The latter lowered his head and bulled his way through the line. The linebacker spun around the center and was waiting for him. MacDay hit him at full speed. He was hoping....

It didn't work. After the play, the middle linebacker gave MacDay a hand up. "Wow," said the man, "you put a good hit on me." MacDay only grunted.

"No way, Warrick," said the assistant coach to the center. "That linebacker got around you like you was planted on Arbor Day. Can you try it again, Mac?" MacDay nodded. They ran the play again, and this time MacDay hit the linebacker as hard as he possibly could. This time, for a moment, a short while, he caught a glimpse of the darkened restaurant, the table, Louvina. Then, instantly, it disappeared. He was already getting to his feet.

"Let's try the 37-Weak," said the coach. In this play, Bailess gave the ball to Sonny Staley, and MacDay ran ahead of the ballcarrier, blocking the outside linebacker. MacDay hit his man harder than usual for a scrimmage; the linebacker complained, but MacDay couldn't hear. He was seeing a clear tableau of the restaurant scene. Again, nothing in it moved.

So it went for the rest of the day and the following days of that week before the Cincinnati game. MacDay took his hits aggressively, but all that he got for his pains was the same vivid but motionless tableau he had experienced during the training season. He had to have

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something special happening in order for him truly to go back there; it was only under real game conditions, when his emotional state or his physical energy provided an essential catalyst. So then, he realized, he wouldn't be able to visit Louvina until the Sunday game. He was disappointed, but at least he was beginning to understand the ground rules of the situation.

At last, after five days of tension relieved by occasional unsatisfactory flashbacks, MacDay went to the McGuire Coliseum for the game with Cincinnati. During the pregame preparations, he experienced an intense anxiety and anticipation, unlike anything he'd ever known before in his career. At one point, his hands shaking so much that he was barely able to dress, he considered asking the team physican for something to calm him. But the word would get back to Coach Jennings; the head coach would be displeased, MacDay knew. Jennings would wonder about any player who wanted to be quieted down before a game.

"This is for Lou," MacDay thought, as he and the other Browns charged out of the locker room, down the tunnel toward the field. "I got to break my neck to talk to her, I'll break my neck."

The Cincinnati defense was not as tough as the Phoenix team had been the week before. Coach Jennings was screaming excitedly on the sidelines, and the Browns' players not on the field were standing just out of bounds, shouting encouragement to their teammates. It looked as though Cleveland would be able to take a quick lead over their divisional rivals, and that the game might be decided for good before halftime. This disappointed MacDay somewhat. If that were the case, it was possible that the Cincinnati defense might let down even worse; the Bengal players would feel that it was meaningless to risk injury in a losing cause. In that event, MacDay would have to take the game to them. He took the ball on one play and ran through a hole in the Cincinnati front. He saw the linebackers sliding down the line in pursuit. His instincts told him to cut back to the inside; his mind and his desires made him continue to the outside. A Bengal player hit him from the side, knocking MacDay's legs out from under him, and a second Cincinnati player knocked him out of bounds.

"Well, how do you like it?"

"I don't know what to say, Lou," said MacDay, before he was even able to focus his eyes. "How did you know what size?"

Louvina laughed. MacDay just stared at her; she was so happy that it hurt him, in a way. He

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remembered that she was dead, that she would die not so very long after they left the restaurant; for these last few days he had hated the world, the people in it; he had even hated God for letting someone with so much love be obliterated in such an offhand manner. He genuinely didn't know what to say to her, and he was glad to be bound by the situation. His self of five years past was in control, and he was just a spectator. But he was thankful for even that much. "It was easy, Eldon," she said. "You had that old ring you got for playing in the College All-Star game."

"Yeah, sure," he said. "But, damn it, honey, you didn't have to do it. I don't need a ring like this."

"Of course not," she said smiling. "If you needed the thing, I wouldn't have waited until now to give it to you. I love you, Eldon."

Even five years ago, even unaware of what was to happen, the older MacDay had been unable to reply for a moment. "I love you, too, Lou," he said at last, quietly. He reached across the table and took her hand. MacDay felt an overpowering emotion as their fingers touched. "Yes," he said to himself, "that's Lou. That's just the way I remember her."

"Listen," she said, "I'll be right back. I been crying all over my eye stuff here. I got to go fix it up."

"That's silly, Lou. You look fine. I don't want you to leave me here alone." MacDay's sentiment made every word of hers, every gesture painful, but infinitely wonderful.

"Oh, I'll be right back, I said," she said, rising from her chair. "I'm way ahead of you on the steak, anyway."

MacDay stood, too, and held her before she turned away to find the lavatory. He wanted to go after her, but his previous self wouldn't allow it. He took two steps back to his chair, and turned his ankle. It didn't hurt very much, but the memory of it happening the first time made the situation even more real to MacDay than the garnet ring had done. He sat in his chair, his mind a shifting mixture of feelings. He ate some of the steak, then rubbed his ankle, which was getting sore.

"Your ankle bothering you?" asked Bailess.

"It's fine," said MacDay. "I turned it a little making my cut."

"I didn't see much cut," said one of the Bengal players scornfully.

"That's why my ankle's giving me hell," said MacDay. Then he turned his back and went to the Browns' huddle. His ankle did bother him a bit, and he limped off the field when J. D. Lieger ran on to replace him.

"Thanks, roomy," said Lieger.

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"This is my big break."

MacDay nodded wearily. Jennings' backfield coach came over to see how badly MacDay was injured. "Just turned it a little," said MacDay.

"You want the doc to look at it?"

"Hell, no," said MacDay. "Let me catch my breath, and I'll be back in. I don't want no smartass kid like Lieger breaking one for no touchdown, not while I'm sitting on my ass." The assistant coach smiled and reported to Jennings. MacDay thought about his twisted ankle. It appeared that garnet rings weren't the only souvenirs he could bring back from the past. The thought entered his mind that... later...after they left the restaurant....

"All right, come on, let's go!" he shouted at the Browns on the field. It was third down and six yards to go for a first down. Bailess took the snap and ran back into the pocket, set up, then threw an incomplete pass to Lieger, who had circled out of the backfield. MacDay hadn't really been worried about losing his job to the kid, and he was sorry that Lieger hadn't been able to hang onto Bailess' pass. The Browns would have to punt.

"It worked," he thought. "I saw her again." His mind raced from one thought to another. He began to realize again what might happen when the scene developed further. He shook his head to stop those thoughts, and tried to concentrate on the game.

Just before halftime, MacDay went back into the game. On the second play from scrimmage he was given the ball on the 20-Strong, the run up the middle. He was intent on executing the play correctly, as always, but his main objective had changed. Rather than gaining yardage, his purpose now was to hit the middle linebacker as hard as possible. In this instance, it meant that MacDay had to do some quick shifting to get a good shot at the man and not draw the wrath of the coaching staff. He lowered his head and butted the linebacker. The man gave a little ground, then wrapped his arms around MacDay. The two struggled. MacDay cursed loudly, because he hadn't found the flashback he wanted so badly. "What the hell's the matter?" said the linebacker, as a second Bengal player came over to assist on the tackle, "you'll get your hundred-yard day, all right." The two Cincinnati players toppled MacDay, and the second man managed to knock the ball out of his hands. MacDay scrambled for the fumble, but a Cincinnati player recovered it. The Bengal players jumped up and shouted. The Browns walked slowly from the field. Bailess

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slapped MacDay's back.

"Okay, Mac," said the quarterback. "Even I blow one, once in a while."

"Not the way I did," said MacDay, upset that Louvina had been denied to him.

"Aw, it wasn't so bad," said Bailess. "Why, I seen fumbles kicked back and forth all the way from one end zone to the other. Yours was just a *little* fumble."

"Yeah," said MacDay as they reached the sidelines, "but it probably means we won't get back in the game until the second half."

"Yeah, is right," said Bailess, grinning. "Good boy."

Late in the game, with the Browns leading by a score of thirty-one to thirteen, with second down and five yards to go, Bailess called for a long pass. He looked around at the players bent over in the huddle and said, "63 Fly split right. On three."

"Oh, hell," said Nathaniel Coggins, the wide receiver. He spat on the artificial turf. "Hey, man, there's only three minutes left in this game. What you think they gonna do in three minutes? Why you want me to run my ass off? What for, man? You ain't careful, I just might accidentally pull a hamstring or something."

"Shut up," said Bailess. "Break!" They all clapped, and went to their positions.

"You don't never pull no hamstring when we're winning," said one of the linemen to Coggins.

"Yeah," he said, "you're right. I forgot." The play went off, but the pass was overthrown. The next play was 25 Crunch split right; MacDay carrying through the hole between left guard and tackle. He knew that time was running out; he had failed to get another flashback all afternoon. He was determined to do it now. He took the handoff from Bailess and charged into the Cincinnati defenders. A hole opened up for him, and in a few steps he was through. He raced down the length of the field; only a weak-side safety stood between him and a touchdown. MacDay gave a little fake with his head, then paused. The pause was just enough to let the Cincinnati player adjust. Jennings saw from the sidelines that MacDay seemed to have given up, and the head coach screamed; MacDay couldn't hear. The safety hit him high, and another defensive player recovered quickly enough to hit MacDay again, spinning him off his feet.

MacDay held his head. He felt terrible. He had quit, he had deliberately permitted that safety to crack him, when MacDay had had a certain touchdown. It was going to be difficult to explain. He wondered about the silence around him. Had his actions been that

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obvious? He lifted his head, and he was reassured.

Louvina was coming back to the table, accompanied by three other men. MacDay was worried; he always worried when she talked to strangers, whatever the situation. But he *knew* who these men were. He knew, but he realized that it didn't make any difference. He could only watch.

"Eldon," she said, "these here men are from Jackson. They say they saw you play ball at Hanson High."

"That's right, Mr. MacDay," said one of the men, taller than the other two. He didn't seem to be at all interested in meeting MacDay. His tone was grim, his expression blank.

"I used to live near you, as a matter of fact," said a second man, a black man. "On West Third Street, around the corner from Bar's Mike and Grill. You remember?"

"Sure," said MacDay. Five years ago he had suspected nothing. He had only wanted to eat his meal in peace.

"We were wondering if we could coax you and your wife into having a drink with us after you finish," said the first man.

"I'm sorry," said MacDay.

"Oh, it's all right, I think," said Louvina. "After all, this man tell me he used to bring your ma the paper. I mean, just this once, it'd be all right, wouldn't it, Eldon?"

"I understand that you're probably always besieged by fans," said the black man. "But my son is probably your biggest rooter. Next to your wife, of course." The black man laughed briefly. "I have this football in my hotel room. I bought it for Willie. I was really hoping you'd sign it for him."

"It be okay with me," said Louvina. "Maybe it would help the boy some. You're always saying how you want to do something for the community."

"All right, all right," said MacDay impatiently. He pleaded with his wife silently, his five years of helpless hindsight just as ineffectual now, trapped in his second chance. The five of them stood up; the third stranger, silent through all the conversation, took out a wallet and paid MacDay's check. Then they left the restaurant. Louvina walked with her arm through MacDay's; the two of them walked behind the three men.

"I'd like to ask you a question, Mrs. MacDay," said the tall man. "Why do you think your husband plays football? I mean, why does he go out there, week after week, and put himself in a position to get dangerously injured? One play after another, he runs right into a bunch of other men who are trained to cut him down. And winning a

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stupid football game can't be worth all that, can it?"

Louvina laughed. "They ask him that all the time. And Eldon always say the same thing. I don't say it as good as he do, but it has to do with wanting something bad enough. Eldon want to be *good,* is what he want. He want to be the best."

"That's not the reason I take all the pain," thought MacDay sadly. "It's for you, Lou. I hurt for you."

"No," said the tall man, "that's not why he goes out there and gets bruised. I hate to contradict you, Mrs. MacDay, but he goes out there because he gets paid a hell of a lot of money."

"Not all that much," said MacDay sourly.

The men ignored him. "And what do you think, Mrs. MacDay?" asked the black man. "If he gets paid so much for taking a risk, don't you think if we got paid ten times as much, we'd take a bigger risk?"

"What do you mean?" asked Louvina, frightened by the man's tone.

They had been crossing the parking lot of the restaurant. The silent third stranger had left their group to get his car. Now the tall man grabbed Louvina, and the black man caught MacDay in a tight hammer lock. The third man drove straight for them. "You see, MacDay," said the black man, "we gonna make sure you don't feel like playing. The money didn't work, and the threats didn't work. Chuck here, why, he's gonna work."

The tall stranger waited until the car was only a few yards away, then he pushed Louvina in front of it. MacDay twisted free of the man holding him. He saw Louvina fall in front of the car. He heard her screaming, he saw her huge eyes, bright and staring, looking straight at him. "God damn it, not again," thought MacDay. He tried to run to her, but the black man tripped him. As he fell, he never lost contact with Louvina's eyes. They seemed to grow even larger. He heard her, still screaming. "Please, God," cried MacDay, "not her!"

"What?"

MacDay could only groan. The heavy chest of drawers lay across his legs. He couldn't move. He just stared at the pieces of the broken mirror on the floor. He saw his face, contorted by pain.

"What did you say, roomy?" It was Lieger, calling from their other room. "What are you doing out of bed? The doc —" The rookie came into the bedroom, stopped, and ran to where MacDay lay twisted on the floor. He hauled the massive chest up off MacDay's legs. "Are you okay?"

MacDay just shook his head. He knew his legs were shattered,

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just as Louvina's had been. Crushed. He knew it would be nothing short of a miracle if he would ever stand on them again, let alone walk. "God," he muttered, "you got a great sense of humor."

"What?" said Lieger frantically. "Wait, I'll call the doc. You been out since you got popped. Jennings thought you'd rather come to here than the hospital."

"Sure," said MacDay faintly. "Hey, J. D., you better get the hang of picking your spots. You ain't gonna get all your spots picked for you. Not like this."

"You just wait, Mac," said Lieger, dialing the phone. "We'll get you to a hospital. You need it now."

MacDay knew that a chest of drawers couldn't have so thoroughly destroyed his legs. But how could he explain that he'd been run over by a car, five years in the past, in his own bedroom? Jennings would never understand. "That's it," thought MacDay. "No more games, no more seeing Lou. No more seeing Lou. Seen her die twice, now. That's enough, I guess."

"You'll be all right," said Lieger, who was near hysterics.

"It's all right," said MacDay to himself. He was curiously peaceful. The pain in his legs seemed to be a solid object, with a separate existence of its own. It didn't throb or stab; it was constant, rolling on with MacDay's own life. That made it easier to ignore. "It's all right. I been dead for five years already, anyhow. In a way. Ain't had no soul for five years. Been in Hell for five years. So for a few weeks, God has to lift the lid off Heaven for me, just to make me sweat. God, you sure a *bad* dude."

"You're crazy, Mac," said Lieger.

"Didn't know I was talking out loud."

"Sometimes, you're just plain crazy. No offense."

MacDay didn't answer. He was looking into the shards of mirror all around him. All he could see were eyes, huge eyes, the eyes of a dying person. He didn't know whose.

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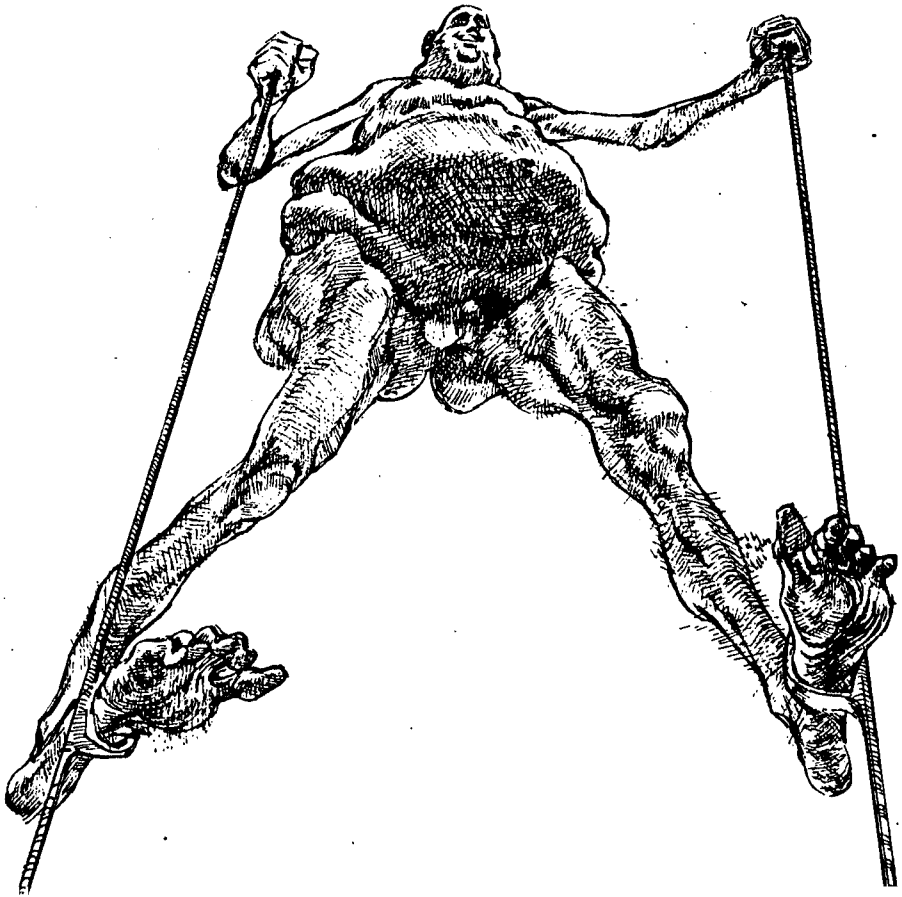

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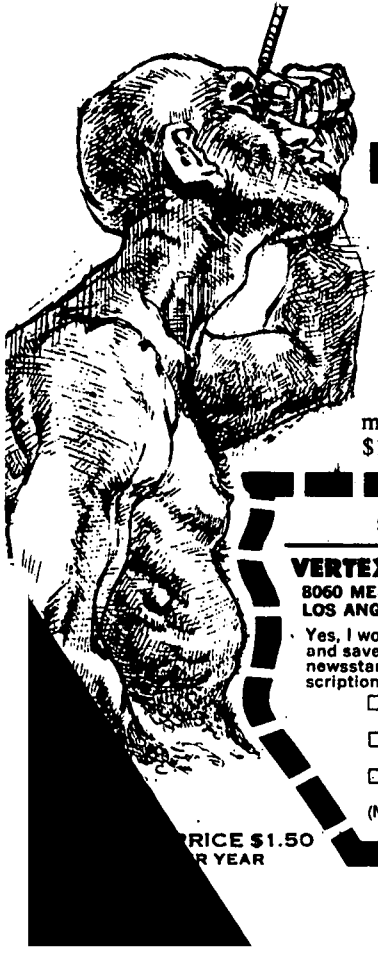

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Letters

Vonnegut On Trout

The Colonial Dames removed George Washington's false teeth from the museum at Mount Vernon several years ago. You have now surpassed those ladies in Nice-Nellyism with your bowdlerization of *Venus on the Half-Shell,* by Kilgore Trout.

You have corrected his spelling and syntax, divided his work into paragraphs, and tinkered with the story itself to make it everywhere comprehensible. You have cheated your readers of the exhilarating opportunity to guess what the author was trying to say as opposed to what he really did say.

Trout, incidentally, submitted in person a story to *G-8 and His Battle Aces* back in 1934, and the editor captured the bitter-sweet quality of all of Trout's masterpieces when he exclaimed admiringly, "My God, if you could only write!"

— Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

Trout Ansers

Dear Mr. Ferman:

Mr. Vonnegut is wrong to critisize you because you fixed up my speling & my grammer. He ought to know that lots of editors do this for there writers. Look at Jack London, he was rotten in speling and sintax but he was a hell of a good writer, he'l be red as long as Mr. Vonnegut is, which I don't think will be long, since the world is coming to an end pretty soon. About fifty years or less, if Mr. Coustoux and deepsea diver is right. And a good thing too, says I.

As for boodlerizing my story, I say bulshit. Mr. Vonnegut hisself wrote that I only wrote one spesificaly erotic novel, which was *The Son of Jimmy Valentine.*

I'm going to reveal one thing here I never told nobody before. Vonnegut got his stile from me, he studied it then polished it up a bit. Evan after you fixed up *Venus* anybody with any sense can see the similerity.

Anyway, the editors wont have to work hard corecting my stuff from now. My good friend Jonathen Herovit has promiced me he'll go over my stuff for speling & grammer before I submit it. In fact, he corected this letter before I maled it off to you.

— Kilgore Trout

Despair and the Club in SF

I welcome your new column of Letters and especially the topic with which it opened: the continuing discussion of Aldiss' *Billion Year Spree* (January 1975). In the Enlightenment tradition of spiraling letters, which SF hopefully is coming more and more to emulate, I should like to carry the two concerns of 1) belonging to the Club and 2) despair a bit further.

The place to begin is with the second item and with a quotation from the original catalytic review by the Panshins (March 1974): "in particular the prejudice that to be negative is to be more realistic and truthful about the universe than to be positive." Aldiss values what he himself terms "a natural and decent despair." It is an accepted element of scientific method that the falsification of null hypotheses is most useful in dealing with reality.

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And the Enlightenment giant, David Hume, whom Aldiss might well have discussed in his book along with Buffon and Erasmus Darwin, tells us in the most severe un-Panshinian manner of the value of careful, ironic reservation even to the point of despair: "... any hypothesis, that pretends to discover the ultimate original qualities of human nature, ought at first to be rejected as presumptuous and chimerical." (*A Treatise of Human Nature*)

This leads to my first and honestly more epistolary (less philosophic) point, i.e. belonging or not belonging to the Club of SF. Thank goodness Aldiss reminds us, both in his book and in his letter, that authors must fight alone, that each vision is primarily individual and must stand alone. This is the Humean world of uncertainty, of individual responsibility, of possibility, of sheer complexity. It is the world of a Thomas Pynchon or a John Barth. It is the world that the images of science and the images of SF are particularly suited to communicate. But they will never communicate it adequately if they remain locked into the parochialism and pollyannaism of the Club (Inksetter's letter). The despair of Aldiss and, in fact, the despair of Hume realizes that we cannot in the final analysis "belong" and points the way paradoxically (as often in art) to a more heroic reality and belonging.

— *Donald M. Hassler*

Panshins and Sossidge

This new section is a good idea, at least if we can be civilized about the opportunity afforded. It will, I trust, last long enough for me to edge these two comments into print about the contents of the January issue:

1) Alex Panshin's overall critical perspective is wrong and proceeds from several basic misassumptions, but I know the man well enough and have had sufficient opportunity to hear him expand one-to-one upon his vision to at least accept the fact that it is deeply felt and does not come out of pique at various authors or schools of science fiction. Panshin feels, quite boiling down a complex argument, that John Campbell and the "modern" direction he gave science fiction in effect shut off a whole series of alternative directions which the field might have voyaged into and toward which it was taking beginning steps in the nineteen-thirties: heroic myth, expansion rather than contraction of human possibilities, utopianism rather than dystopianism as one of the guiding textual directions and so on. He feels that JWC's vision, extended as it has been to its inevitable outcome in the dystopian fiction of the late nineteen sixties, has now dead-ended the field, which must either get back to certain of its origins or dissolve into the so-called mainstream of fiction as merely another species of bankrupt post-Joycean modern fiction. I disagree very strongly with this view, but he has spent many years evolving it and at least is now bringing it to bear in real critical perspective, and not all of what he is saying boils down to an attack upon the personna of certain writers. Panshin has not been at all generous toward my work and in my opinion does not understand it, but if he honestly believes that my work is as dysfunctional to a field we both love as I feel is that of, say, E.E. Smith, he is at least a man of integrity.

2) Joanna Russ is a critic with whom I have agreed most of the time and who seems to bring upon her work a fair and enlightened perspective

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which comes from something more than an acquaintance with modern literary tradition and its roots ... and it is for this reason that I find her remarks about Silverberg's BORN WITH THE DEAD so appalling. To call Silverberg "a sossidge factory trying to become an artist" is not only unfair on the face of it — I think the man *is* an artist — but even more seriously is a denial of the agonizing efforts that this writer has made over the years to bring his work to an achieved literar standard. I grant that ambition itself is not achievement and that it would do no good to laud effort merely for effort's sake ... but if Joanna Russ cannot make the distinction between the level of intention and execution in *Born With The Dead* (which she rejects) and that of James Gunn's *Cave of Night*, a very neatly-executed and cleanly-written gimmick story twenty years old which even Gunn, I am sure, would be happy to admit to as youthful work (which she applauds) then what is a Silverberg to do? Go back to Calvin M. Knox and *The Dawning Light* which commanded, at least, an audience no smaller and advances not much smaller than *Born With The Dead?* Why should he bother? Why should any of us bother? I often wonder.

— Barry M. Malzberg

See Ms. Russ's statement in this month's Books column.

Fillip For Dick

For the first time in some twenty years of subscribing to your excellent magazine, I must strongly protest one of the stories. The story is Philip K. Dick's "The Pre-Persons," printed in your anniversary issue.

It is not Mr. Dick's stand on abortion I object to — he is, of course, free to think and write on that or any other subject as he pleases, as am I. I do object to his extraordinarily vitriolic anti-feminism.

Elsewhere in the same issue Dr. Asimov speaks of the writing technique of extending existing conditions to a logical conclusion. It is historically inaccurate (and therefore illogical) to assume as Mr. Dick apparently does, that all abortions are performed at the wish of the mother. Many abortions are done at the urging of the father, in some cases when the woman would prefer to have the child. The situation Mr. Dick imagines certainly could come to pass, but the blame should be divided between the sexes.

Of the four main characters in the story, two are gentle, compassionate men, the third a sensitive boy. The only woman is portrayed as a vicious, selfish, almost inhuman virago. Surely a one-sided picture, and one which totally distorts the view, as all such pictures do.

If Mr. Dick really does see all American women in this light, I am sorry for him.

— Phoebe W. Ellis

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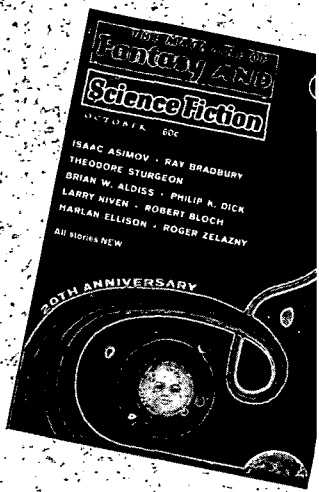

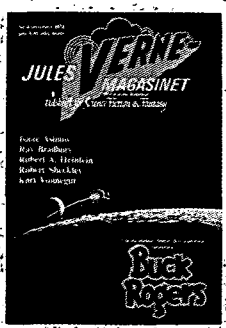

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